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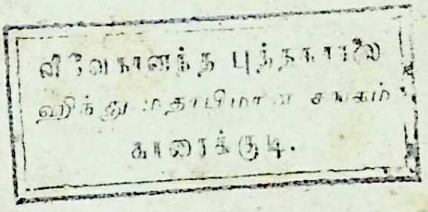
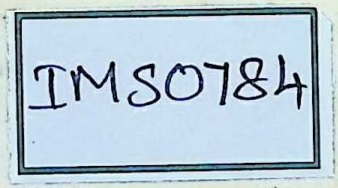
GUNSMOKE HACIENDA

A Novel
by
GRANT TAYLOR





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All characters mentioned in this book are entirely fictitious and do not refer to living persons.

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CHAPTER I

DANGEROUS WATERS

It was known in the Mesa Grande country simply as the "Rio", the River. Usually the Rio meandered sluggishly among its sand-bars, but today it was high, wide, muddy, and white-capped. Not from local rains; for three years the Mesa Grande country had been drought-cursed, whipped by blistering hot winds, smothered in sand. The rains that now stuffed the river bank-full had fallen several hundred miles above, merely reminding the Mesa Grande country that rain still fell—somewhere.

The rider of the sleek-coated red sorrel, as he emerged from the high mesquite brush on a sand-drifted flat, gave one look at the roaring flood and pulled up short.

Directly ahead of him on the brink of the stream two saddled horses were nibbling indifferently at the dry brush. Above them reared a twenty-foot tower of peeled pine poles. Across the Rio was a twin structure. Between the towers stretched a thin cable, track for two pulleys from which hung a rough boat-like cage of boards and poles.

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Towers, cable and cage, as Cole Courtney, rider of the red sorrel, knew, made a device that ranchers along the Rio termed the "Armstrong" ferry. "Armstrong", because after passengers had slid in the cage from one tower to the cable sag above the middle of the river, said passengers had to use their strong arms as propelling power to the other tower.

Courtney's eyes, darkly blue in his sun-browned face, swept aloft. The owners of the saddled horses were on the platform of the tower, the pair outlined against a sky that because of the sand-storms never possessed the deep turquoise of South-western heavens. They had not seen him, for although his sorrel had already traded nickered greetings with the two grazing animals, the booming roar of the tumbling waters drowned the exchange.

Unnoticed, Courtney's first impulse was to leave promptly, but as he swung his horse, he was held by the two silhouetted on their aerial perch. One was a middle-aged man, burly, wearing a broad-brimmed fedora and carrying a pair of black leather saddle-bags. The other, slim, lithe, possessed softly curving contours that proclaimed youth and femininity through the masculine overalls and brush jacket.

Courtney checked his horse. The two were arguing, and mostly by signs because of the river's noise. The girl was waving graceful hands towards the cage tied to the tower, while the man gestured violently at the combers of the raging river. Easy to see that the gent was baulking at trusting himself to a chicken-coop on a string of rusty cable. An argument that a stranger need

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across 'stead of using that chicken-coop Armstrong, I'll go with you to do the strong arm act."

Dr. Waite gripped his saddle-bags more tightly, and looked sullenly at the river.

"Looky here," he burst out, "three of us on that cable with this tower leaning over like it is—not for me. And as for swimming my horse 'cross that river, I never had any such intention in my head. Look for yourself. See how this tower sways."

Nora Falconer's face, which had lighted at Cole's words, again became despairing at the doctor's refusal.

Courtney squinted once more at the flood and the leaning tower, and then he went into action. Rather queer action. Stepping over to his horse, he shucked the animal of bridle and saddle. On the sorrel's head he swiftly fashioned a hackamore with a short length of rope. Then taking the lariat from his saddle, he turned to the ladder.

"Insurance—in case," he said. "*Mañana*, my horse, also at your service, folks. I call him *Mañana*, because it'll be many a *mañana* before they bring another horse along to equal him."

Despite the desperation of the moment, the girl's eyes lighted as she swiftly appraised the sorrel, going over him from head to tail, nodding her head a little as if agreeing with Courtney. The sorrel *was* a horse. Although it was not so easy to see how he could become insurance—in case.

With the hand that carried the coiled lariat, Courtney took possession of the saddle-bags containing the doctor's medical kit. The other hand came out to take

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the doctor's arm with a sinewy, persuasive grip which urged the reluctant Waite towards the shaky ladder of the tower.

The doctor began a heated protest, but as he looked at the young stranger he became silent. Courtney's deep blue eyes in a thin-featured, strong face were the smiling sort. The straight mouth, too, was smiling a little, and yet there was a definite hardness about the man, a forcefulness which showed that this young fellow had made up his mind to risk a crossing and would not be stopped. Between defying this stranger and the river, Waite chose the river.

Almost without conscious volition he found himself clambering up the ladder, with the cow-boy and the girl following close behind. Once they were on the slanting platform of the leaning tower, Courtney allowed no time for the doctor to weaken.

"Better sit in front, Doc!" he said quickly, and a slight shove pushed the physician into the wooden, boat-shaped crate that hung suspended from the cable by its pulleys. "You next, Miss," he went on, touching Nora Falconer's elbow to steady her.

Armstrong ferries along the Rio afforded few luxuries. The passengers were forced to squat on the bottom, with their heads barely above the side-boards.

The end of his lariat the stranger fastened to the bottom of the cage; while doing this he was studying the torrent below and the sag of the cable as seen from the elevation of the tilted platform. The roar of the river, the low, rumbling grind of moving boulders in the dirty current dinned in their ears. As if giving

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witness to its strength, the water lazily spewed from its muddy breast the trunk of an enormous cottonwood tree. For a moment the log sent one green arm above the flood before the river dragged it down. The doctor's fears were more than justified, Courtney decided: only the most desperate need could demand the crossing of the river.

Maybe some of that deliberate weighing of risk against necessity showed on his face. Dr. Waite in alarm half-raised himself to get out, but the stranger, completing his estimate of the situation, in rapid succession unbuckled his cartridge belt and filled leather holster, kicked off his chaps, pulled off his boots, his jacket, and his white, steeple-crowned sombrero. Throwing these into the cage, he loosened the slip-knot that held the cage to a four-by-four beam. Then as the car squeakily got under way, he leaped lithely aboard.

Wheels spinning with increasing speed, the cage carried them to the cable's lowest sag, and left them swinging less than three inches above the crest of the water. There before Courtney could seize the cable to begin the pull upward, a wavelet slapped the clumsy, flat-bottomed scow and almost heeled it over. The cage was much lower than Courtney had estimated, and their situation was to become even more precarious.

Dr. Waite gave a frantic bellow and pointed. Upstream a few yards, a big comber, cream-topped and deadly, was fast bearing down on them. With three people in the cage, it would hit them broadside, perhaps hard enough to snap the cable-fastening at the tower.

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But one thing could help, and the stranger did it, diving smoothly overboard, carrying with him the coiled lariat, one end of which he had fastened to the cage. The awkward craft, relieved of Courtney's one hundred and eighty pounds, sprang up barely in time to avoid the disastrous impact of the wave.

A whirlpool sucked at the diver, drew him far down before Courtney, fighting hard, came to the surface. There in the sunlight, he drew a deep breath, reversed his position to face upstream, and saw that the cage and occupants were temporarily safe.

Hanging to the lariat, partly pulling himself along it, partly swimming, Courtney neared the cage just as the panic-stricken doctor saw another wave, larger than the one before, approaching around the river bend.

Seeing the comber, Nora Falconer at once began swiftly to jerk off her boots, intending to dive over and further lighten the cage.

"I knew it!" the doctor shouted. "We're gone goslin's. That damn' hombre got us into this, and he's holdin' us down hangin' to that rope. I'm goin' to make him turn loose."

Mouthing curses, Waite swept up the gun from Courtney's holster in the cage bottom, but the girl promptly swung a boot she had just removed. It came down hard, the heel hitting the back of the doctor's hand. With a yowl of pain he dropped the gun to the cage bottom.

Then unhesitatingly and just in time Nora Falconer came over the side, and Cole Courtney making a wild

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grab, caught an arm, hauling her to the surface. Her head came up, her hair a glory of coppery red, dripping wet, glistening in the sun. Courtney drew her to his side and her slim hands clutched at the rope as the second huge wave came, overwhelming them. Before they were submerged the girl sucked in a deep breath.

Jerked by the powerful force of the current, she was almost wrenched from the rope, but the powerful arm that encircled her slim body took much of the strain from her hands. The pair came up again as the wave subsided, gulping in air. Courtney judged from the girl's action in the water that she could swim, but not well. Not much opportunity for learning, in a country that the drought had been making over into desert for long rainless years.

They were in as tight, as perilous a situation as ever Courtney had found himself in. The doctor was too paralysed with fear to attempt to pull the cage to the opposite tower. It was plain that they could never escape by their own efforts. The flooded Rio in all its tremendous strength would hold them helpless until some greater wave smashed them.

Alone, Courtney might swim to shore, but certainly not with the girl. Only a miracle could save them, and miracles were scarce along the Rio.

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CHAPTER II

MIRACLE OF THE RIO

EVER since she had made her appeal to the stranger, Nora Falconer had resigned the affair to him. Realizing now their desperate straits, she faced Courtney, alertly and coolly waiting for his next move.

To her surprise, he pursed his lips and sent three shrill whistles towards the bank they had left. Now the girl saw Courtney's reason for unsaddling the red sorrel. Answering the whistled summons, the horse after advancing to the brink and standing there a moment with nervous hoofs, entered the flood to swim in a bee-line towards Courtney. Nora gasped audibly. A faithful dog might do that, but a horse—never.

"The Armstrong ferry system having plumb bogged down," said Courtney, "*Mañana* will have to try his tug-boat service. Grab his tail as he comes by and he'll tow you ashore. It's our only chance."

"The doctor first," protested the girl.

"You first," ordered the stranger curtly. "No tellin' if we'll be here when *Mañana* comes back."

The coppery-crowned head gave a decisive shake. "The doctor first," its owner insisted. "Dad needs a doctor, no matter what happens to me."

There was no time to argue, and Courtney, his

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admiration for this girl's bravery plain in his eyes, turned to shout to Waite. Whereupon the medico, showing a sudden astonishing streak of nerve, at once plopped overboard with the grace of a diving hippo. His arms made a wild grab for Courtney, and for a moment there was danger of his pulling the rider down. Courtney broke loose and slapped Waite on the face, hard enough to make the doctor listen to orders.

"Turn him back where we come from," he entreated. "It's easier to make."

"We started to get you to the other side," returned Courtney inexorably. "If we get drowned, we'll get drowned trying to get there."

The sorrel, swimming powerfully, dodging the occasional snags and driftwood, was nearing them. Headed by Courtney for the other bank, the animal swam past. The doctor, seizing the tail, was towed along. It was a fight every foot of the way. A half-dozen times floating submerged snags threatened to entangle horse and man. Treacherous currents fought the swimming animal, forced him farther and farther downstream. The bulky physician was a heavy drag.

The two were almost out of sight around a bend when *Mañana*, reaching a bank that sloped up gently from the water, found footing to clamber up. After him the doctor climbed, to stand on dry land, shaky-kneed, dripping muddy water.

Nora Falconer forgot her own imminent danger. The girl's eyes were shining. "I saw a miracle first hand," she declared soberly. "And a horse like that isn't a horse—he's a miracle, too."

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"Miracles don't generally spout twice in the same place," said Courtney, "but we'll see if he won't try it again." The whistled call came once more, and the horse came trotting back along the bank, his red coat soiled with the muddy water, cocked his ears forward. Opposite them, he again entered the water and fought his way towards them. It took him an interminable time, and meanwhile heavy wave after wave washed over the pair. Half-stunned by the ceaseless impacts, Nora Falconer clung stubbornly to the lariat. Failing the arm about her, she would have been torn loose long before the horse could return.

Courtney, for all the danger, with his arm about the girl, was able from the close range to absorb a few details. Such as the long lashes which Nora Falconer's eyes seemed at times to use as a Spanish señorita uses a coquettish fan. The mouth he decided when not smiling had a wilful line, or was it merely an indication of determination ?

She was getting tired he saw, when *Mañana* arrived. Slowly the horse wheeled about as Courtney guided him back towards the bank, manœuvring the animal so the girl's hands could clutch the fanned-out strands of tail. "Hold tight," he ordered. "Don't let loose until you're up on the bank."

She nodded, hearing his voice as if from a great distance, and gave herself to *Mañana's* charge. That journey to the bank was like a slow-passing nightmare. Frequently waves, catching her unawares, submerged her, making her choke and gasp. At times *Mañana* seemed to make no progress. What difference did it

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make if she reached the bank? She had brought a doctor for her father. Her job was done. It would be easier to turn loose. They would never make it, anyway. Her fingers were relaxing a little of their grip on the tail, when a voice shouted behind her.

"Tight!" Courtney's voice was yelling. "Tight!"

Her fingers took a new hold and she looked back in surprise. Courtney was out in the stream behind her, swimming desperately in their wake. She guessed that he had followed her to be on hand in case she or *Mañana* was caught in a treacherous drift.

As he stroked powerfully and expertly, a drifting mass of brush bore on him, and as he dodged it, another huge wave bore down, engulfing him under a muddy wall of liquid.

Nora cried to him. *Mañana* was scrambling up on the bank. She was safe, but Courtney was still battling, vainly it seemed to her. Helpless, she could only call encouragement, and as his arms in an overhand stroke beat the water in a final effort, an eddying current carried him towards the bank.

Nora shouted jubilantly until a few feet from shore another current snatched the sorrel's master and viciously bore him back.

The swimmer's face set in one last effort. Carried swiftly along, a low-hanging willow branch from a peninsula extending into the river touched his fingers, and his hand closed desperately on it. It held him momentarily while the girl, clutching the small willow trunk, leaned over to press down a stouter branch within reach of Courtney's hand.

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So far spent he was, that for a half-minute after he had seized the branch he was able only to grip it without moving. But he smiled at the girl as he reached his other hand out slowly and began inching up the branch.

He was now within reach of the girl, and recklessly she bent far out to grasp one of his hands, lifting him to shore with a strength that amazed him. For a little while he stood breathing hard, exhausted by the struggle, so tired that he could barely stand. And then suddenly he collapsed.

It was now the girl's arms that went quickly around the man to support him, to ease him gently to the bank. The girl's closeness seemed a stimulant to revive Courtney's exhausted strength. He got to his feet, apologizing for his exhaustion, and they moved along the bank until they stood below the tower, which the doctor had already climbed to tow in the cage by the rope which was used to bring the contraption to the desired side.

"That was too close," stated Courtney. "I figgered the Rio had us. Next time you'll think twice before letting a stranger try to get you across a river."

"I will not," declared Nora Falconer. "Not at least if he looks half as capable as you. I wish—I could thank you in some adequate way. There are no words to thank a stranger who'd risk his life as you have."

"Don't try to thank me at all. Thank *Mañana.*" Pride in the sorrel was in Courtney's voice. The sorrel came up to them, and the girl patted the wet arched neck. The horse snorted once, and then permitted her caress. Nora noticed his brand, small, intricate, a

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Mexican brand, Mexicans not being content with the simple characters used for most American brands.

From the tower above, Courtney's pair of chaps dropped to drape themselves ingloriously about the owner's head and shoulders. Cole looked up and side-stepped in time to miss being hit by his boots. His hat, six-shooter and belt and Nora's boots and hat followed. The doctor, disgruntled, dripping water, muttering to himself, descended carrying his saddle-bags.

"You'll come to our ranch of course," said the girl.

"Afraid I can't," Courtney returned. "I hear a bunch of riders headin' this way through the bosque, and it might be better not to be seen by them. I'll ride on ; find some place below to ford, cross and get my saddle."

"But surely I'll see you again !" exclaimed the girl, frankly disappointed.

"Yes, you'll see me again," he promised smilingly. "I must talk to you before you leave for Mexico. Or perhaps you won't be leaving now. I came up here to see Brand Falconer, but of course that's out now. I've heard he had no sons or wife, so I'll have to talk to you. It's important."

She studied him for a moment, curious as to his business with Brand Falconer, but he did not see fit to explain. His face was inscrutable as he slung his chaps over the sorrel's back and tied his boots together with a rawhide thong to put them on later. The pounding of the approaching horsemen became louder.

"*Adios !*" he said smilingly, and sliding up on the

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sorrel, headed into the brush and was gone as mysteriously as he had appeared at the tower.

The girl's eyes clouded as she looked after him. When a stranger in this country was leery of being seen, usually it meant that he was an outlaw on the dodge. This region above the Border was full of wanted men, either drifting to Mexico or ranging along the line, riding with the renegade bands of rustlers that dealt in "wet" cattle.

She had taken an instant liking to Cole Courtney, as he called himself. It hurt her to think that the rider who had so gallantly risked his life might belong to the lawless clan. He hadn't seemed the kind that would.

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CHAPTER III

ON TO MEXICO

THE half-dozen riders who swept down out of the brush were from the neighbouring Kilgour outfit. They were led by Harge, Dake Kilgour's only son, a big rawboned fellow of thirty, with a booming voice that sounded genial enough as long as its owner was not crossed. Harge pulled up to stare in surprise at the dripping girl and doctor, his hazel eyes dwelling on the slim figure moulded by the girl's wet clothes.

"Too bad about your dad, Nora," he said. "So you got the doctor across that ferry. Lord, girl, yuh might 'a' been drowned with the river rampagin' that-a-way. Why didn't yuh send some man from your ranch? How'd yuh get so wet?"

"No men around to send, as it happened," she said. She did not explain what had happened at the river, but asked Kilgour to let the physician have a horse. Harge shouted to one of his men to dismount, and offered Nora his own mount. Instead she swung a foot into the stirrup he vacated for her and swung up behind him. At once they set out on a lope along the bosque trail, lining out for the Falconer ranch which sat back on a low bench above the river.

A silent, short ride, although Harge who long had

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eyed this girl with hope of possession tried to make talk. Nora, thinking sadly that she might find her father no longer alive, was not in the mood. The accident was the final blow to the catastrophe of the great droughts that had gripped the Mesa Grande country, ruining the never very strong range, killing its grass, sweeping it with great sand-storms. One such drought could be survived, but Mesa Grande had had a succession of them until at last in despair its people were calling it *Desierto Grande*. There remained only broom-weed, a few yuccas, and great stretches entirely bare, drifted over with sand.

Swiftly they came into the Falconer ranch yard, a square almost surrounded by the various houses, sheds and barns, all with brown adobe unplastered walls. Before the house a great yucca reared its thick stalk to a height of over thirty feet, with a spiked tuft on the top.

Formerly in the yard there had been extensive flower-beds and a lily pond, but now only the roses climbing the brown walls remained alive. The drought had brought desolation to the very door of the Falconer ranch. Nora had insisted on water for the roses, even when it had to be hauled in by a tank wagon from the river. This Mesa Grande was finished as ranching country, and the Falconers and their neighbours, the Kilgours, were driving to Mexico.

People were clustered in the yard or at the corrals, for word of Brand's accident had spread. There was the cattle foreman, Sandy Neil; the horse foreman, Lin Button; and a dozen riders young and old with their

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families who occupied quarters at the ranch. Nora hardly saw them as she dismounted and hurried the doctor in to Brand Falconer. The injured rancher lay in one of the long series of strung-out rooms.

In the sick room was Bernardine Falconer, a relative from the East, tall, forty, with the sophistication that comes from having discarded four husbands of as many nationalities, including an Italian count. She was deftly doing what could be done for the broken man in the bed, an antique with a huge wooden canopy, sent as a wedding-present from Mexico forty years before.

Brand Falconer was delirious, muttering, and his pain-wracked face was almost that of a stranger to Nora. Tears came to her eyes, but she brushed them away ; this was a time for action, not sentiment. The physician, Waite, was, for all his hesitation at crossing a river, an excellent doctor. His life work was, after all, not to cross rivers, but to save lives, and he set at his task now with brusque efficiency.

The rancher fought them until sedatives took hold, after which Waite made his examination. Following that came a hectic period when splints, bandages, medicines, compresses, and hypodermic injections were applied in rapid-fire order.

Then Waite ordered strong, black coffee for himself, lit a long cigar, and broke his silence.

"No concussion as far as I can tell," he decided. "Nor skull fracture. Probably hurt internally—can't be sure. Lord knows he's broken up badly enough otherwise. Shoulder and knee-cap smashed, and left ankle will

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be stiff the rest of his life. At best he'll need at least three months of rest. You Falconers been planning to trail to Mexico? You'll have to forget about that for a long time."

The girl looked at her father, swathed in bandages, looking old, gaunt, the ghost of the strong man who had ridden out that morning.

They had planned to leave in a week, two at most. Their feed was short and they had no money to buy more. Pasture and feed depots for their cattle and horse herds had been arranged along the first half of the route. They had to go or else be closed out—lose everything.

Brand Falconer had planned to abandon the ranch altogether, taking with him all his possessions worth the taking. Everything was in readiness, big wagons prepared, space for furniture, feed, provisions allotted to the families that were going with them. It was to be a combination covered wagon trek and cattle and horse drive.

The sprightly tenderfoot, Bernardine Falconer, who had since her visit gone cow-boy with a vengeance, taking to bullhide chaps, men's shirts, Levi's and cowboy boots, and even adopting picturesque range phrases, drifted over, her big-rowelled Chihuahua spurs clanking.

"You can't help him by looking at him," she told Nora with brusque kindness. "You can be thankful he was hurt no worse. As for the trip to Mexico, your bet is coppered sure 'nough."

"We're not done yet," said the girl stubbornly.

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"We're going as soon as Dad is out of danger. Cattle, horses, wagons and all."

"Good," the Eastern lady said heartily. "On to Mexico, come hell and high water. Spoken like a Falconer, Nora, a true member of our crazy tribe that loves to bust in where even fools hesitate to tread. We Falconers have left our corpses strewn over half of North America. One or two even of our ornery relatives have been strung up by the neck until they were dead, dead, dead. On to Mexico it is. Le's go powwow with Dan'l Boone."

"Dan'l Boone" was one of the names Bernardine gave Sandy Neil, the red-headed, bass-voiced, good-natured big bear who was cattle foreman. Sandy had clumped into the kitchen and was sitting there frowning over Brand's list of casualties when Nora and Bernardine entered. On the foreman's head was set an eared toreador's cap, out from which long sandy hair mixed with grey straggled. This bullfighter's cap had been worn by Sandy ever since his return from a trip to Mexico a few months before, along with a gold-braided toreador jacket which ended above a soiled but still red scarf. Below incongruously were the cloth trousers and high-heeled boots of a cow-man. The why of the combination was a mystery on the Falconer Thirteenth Ranch.

The door opened and let in Lin Button, the horse foreman, a small, dark-faced Texan who thought only of the herd of mixed Arabian and Morgan horses bred by Brand Falconer in the foothills which hemmed in Mesa Grande.

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"We shore can't wait," agreed Sandy as Nora broached the subject of the drive. "We got to go now or else turn down our hand. You stay here with yore dad, Nora. Me and Lin will line out. This trail trip won't be nothin' ; at most we mebbe might have to shove a few greasers out'n the road. What's yore opinion, Countess Berdoo ?" he asked Bernardine. When he wanted to be formal, Sandy addressed Bernardine Falconer as "Countess Berdoo".

"With a Dan'l Boone like you in charge, what is there to say but to sail on ?" she returned. "You won't have to shove any greasers out of the road as long as you wear that get-up. One look at the face and ears under that toreador béret and Santa Anna's army would scatter."

"I'm gittin' plumb fed up with bein' hoorawed on this here bull-sticker's outfit," grumbled Sandy. "I don't wear it from choice ; it's account a vow I taken when I was down in Mexico. It ain't nobody's concern, but I might's well tell I won this here skull-cap and monkey coat off'n a fat toreador down in Mexico. I was teachin' him poker, and I won the complete outfit —cap, cape, jacket and knee-pants. He give me the coat and scarf and cap, and I let him go into another room to change his pants, there bein' ladies present. An' that son of a bull-annoyer jist vamoosed through a window takin' the pants and cloak with him. So I made me a vow to wear this part o' the outfit until I cut that fat hombre's sign again, an' shucked him of his britches by main force. No bullfighter can stick a pair of banderiller—banderillers in my withers and

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twist 'em around. That's why I wear this outfit—I taken me a vow, I tell yuh."

"It makes a good yarn, anyway," admitted the Countess Berdoo. She rolled a cigarette expertly with one hand, while Sandy, who had coached her in the stunt, nodded his head approvingly as a pianist might nod praise to a child prodigy of the keys. Sandy had made the Countess his protégée in all things pertaining to Western range life.

He got to his feet. "Now that yuh can roll cigareets," he said, "how 'bout helpin' me break a pair of mules? Yuh've done a pile o' hoofin' it over the globe, Countess, but breakin' a team of wild Spanish mules, that's something you ain't never saw. Leave yore life insurance policies on the table where they'll be handy for yore heirs to git at, an' let's go."

Their light talk was intended to cheer up Nora Falconer, keeping her from dwelling on the broken man who lay under the canopy of the Mexican bed, with the doctor watching over him for haemorrhages that would indicate internal injuries. With a rough kindness they herded Nora out to witness a wild session with the unbroken mules. That kept her occupied until evening when Dake Kilgour and his son, Harge, dropped over to inquire about their neighbour, using the occasion for a private talk with Nora.

"Tough lines," said grizzled old Dake Kilgour. "The bird that pulled the trick oughta be skinned alive."

"Talkin' o' that, there was something I wanted to ask about," said Harge. "About your crossing the Rio. The doctor says a stranger helped yuh."

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"Yes," she said. "Why ?"

"That hombre was riding a sorrel horse and wearin' a white sombrero 'cordin' to the doc."

"What if he was ?" asked Nora directly.

"Because this stranger was seen by that rider o' ours, Pasqual Torreon, who found yore dad. Pasqual saw him ridin' off right soon after Pasqual heard the shot and rode t' see what it was about. He says the fellow was wearin' a light sombrero an' straddlin' a red sorrel horse."

" 'Nother thing," said Dake, "we rode down where it happened, thinkin' we might find tracks of the skunk that done it. They was drifted over by the wind, but we found a ·40–·70 shell. From a Sharp's, what they used to call the cow-boy's rifle. Not many of them in this country, but still quite a few in Mexico." Nora's heart gave a leap at that.

"Did you happen to see his rifle ?" queried Harge.

Nora had seen it while Courtney was unsaddling. It was a Sharp's rifle, and on the stock in faded gilt letters was the inscription "Just a Texas Cow-boy".

"But why should anyone from Mexico come up to shoot Dad ?"

Harge Kilgour shrugged his big shoulders. "For one thing there's a bunch o' American ranchers occupyin' the big ranch yore dad inherited from his brother. Mebbe-so they might not like to give it up to yore dad. They been leasing it for next to nothin'. If we locate that buzzard on the sorrel horse, it'll be too bad for him. An' say, Nora, what are yore plans ? No use of holdin' up the drive. Dad and me, we'll look after yore stock

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along with our'n. You, of course, will stay with yore paw. It's no trip for a girl, anyway."

Nora resented their assuming they would have charge of the drive. "We have always been able to look after ourselves," she stated. "I may go if Dad is out of danger. If I don't go, Sandy and Lin will look after our interests."

The Kilgours exchanged a brief look and then, at a nod from his son, Dake went out. Harge stood, smiling down a little at her.

"Look here, Nora," he said, "I got a idea. If you're bent on goin', why not go as Mrs. Harge Kilgour? If you're my wife, I'll have a right to protect yuh, see? Mexico is a mighty tough place. No place for a girl to go into alone." He bent over her. "You love me, don't yuh, Nora?" he asked. "Know me well enough t' trust me. If yore dad dies, I want to look after yuh. Always figgered that would be my job some day. An' you're plenty old enough to marry. Most of the girls in my family marry at fifteen."

"Forget it, Harge," said Nora sharply. "With Dad lying in there, maybe dying, how can you think about romance? If you can call it that," she said with a little sarcasm at the proposal. "And I know that stranger who helped us over the river didn't fire that shot at Dad. I know."

"How many men would ever be hanged if the verdicts depended on whether or not some woman just knowed a certain man couldn't of fired a shot?" sneered Harge. Baffled, he looked down at her. "All right," he said, "I'll drop it. There'll be plenty of time for romance

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down in *Mañanaland.*" Some secret idea seemed to amuse Harge Kilgour and, chuckling to himself, he dragged his spurs out of the house.

Nora looked after him, and then as if again protesting against the suspicion against Courtney, shook her head decidedly. It was ridiculous to charge him with that shot. "Cole Courtney, at your service, folks." He might be outlaw, but he was no dry-gulcher!

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CHAPTER IV

UNDER A RED MOON

In two days Brand Falconer was able again to take notice of the world around him, to recognize and talk to Nora who had watched him drift back slowly from death. Dr. Waite, who had been in constant attendance, was preparing to return to town, satisfied that the rancher, barring complications, was out of danger. He still maintained, however, that Falconer needed at least three months to recover sufficiently to get about again.

Falconer lay looking at his daughter, his gaze fixed with a kind of wonder on the halo made about the crown of fine coppery hair. Many of the Falconers had that reddish tinge in their hair ; it ran through them like their streak of love of adventure.

There always had been Falconers in the West, in Texas helping set it free from Mexico, in the army, in the gold-rushes. Nicholas Falconer, Nora's grandfather, had made fortunes in ranching, in freighting and mining. He had two sons, the younger, Brand, Nora's father. The other, Robert, had gone to Mexico, dying there a few years back childless, leaving his big ranch called the *Hacienda Encantada* to his brother, Brand. Brand had paid little attention to his inheritance, leasing it out to neighbouring ranchers for a nominal

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sum, until, when his American range failed him, he had decided to transfer his cattle and horses below the Border.

The Kilgours had arranged for range near the *Hacienda Encantada*, and they were joining in the drive.

Brand Falconer and Nora talked a little about Mexico after the rancher became conscious. The herds would go as they had originally planned. And Nora had announced her determination to remain with her father until he was able to travel. Sandy and Lin could get the herds through. The girl had smiled and chatted gaily, but Brand had seen beneath that show of gaiety.

It had been an adventure to which Nora had looked forward: trailing with their cattle and horses down across the Border to new lands. Brand understood the surging youth in his daughter. What right had he to keep her from the venture? He told her that he wouldn't hear of her staying with him.

"After all," he argued, "all my property is to be yours some day: you've a right to keep an eye on it. It's your duty, in fact. We owe money; the debt must be paid with our cattle and horses. It's your chance, Nora, to taste a little of the adventure that all of us—your grandfather, your uncle and I—have tasted in our lives. And there may come an emergency on the trail that will require handling by someone other than Sandy and Lin Button. You're a girl, and young, Nora, but you've got the head to take responsibility. I ought to have a son to represent me, and not having one, you take his place. Remember, Falconers do

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not turn back. Once they're started, they always go on."

The girl lifted her head, seeking to read Brand's mind, wondering if he really wanted her to go. Brand was thinking proudly that he had never seen a more beautiful woman, the finely-moulded but strong features, the wide mouth made for smiling and tender words—gentleness and strength and fire mingled. To keep her with him while his broken body mended would be like keeping a thoroughbred colt in a dark box stall. There would be no danger. Sandy, Lin, a dozen men in the crew would give their lives for the girl. The Countess Bernardine was going also. And so over the girl's protests, it was decided that Nora should accompany the herds.

It was after this that Nora brought up the subject of the bullet that had caused Brand Falconer's disaster. "That shooting, Dad, could it have something to do with our going to Mexico ?" she asked.

"I doubt it. I didn't see the hombre that fired the rifle. I've made enemies in this country who might want to see me done in before I leave. Dake Kilgour while he was here this mornin' talked of an American from Mexico they suspected, but I figure that's nonsense. The Kilgours have been good neighbours, but they're always goin' off half-cocked. No bottom to 'em. Nora, Harge don't seem quite as important to you as he does to himself, does he ?"

The girl laughed. "No," she said. "I like Harge, but your little daughter sees through his foofaraw. He's flashy, and he thinks himself smart, but he's really very

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simple. You needn't be afraid that I'll ever marry him."

She thought of Cole Courtney and blushed a little. Since the incident at the river, she had not seen him. Nor had anyone else. Either he had returned to Mexico, if he was from there, or else he must be in hiding.

"Do you happen to know if one of the men leasing the *Encantada* range is named, Courtney?" she inquired.

Brand Falconer thought for a moment. "Yeah, that's one of the hombres. There's ten or so. I didn't meet that Courtney. Talked to one outfit, the Knight brothers, and a couple mean-lookin' fellers, the Kimberlys. But no white men would send up a killer to rub me out just so's they c'd keep on using cheap range."

Nora agreed, but the fact that Courtney was one of the men leasing the *Encantada* gave some colour to the Kilgour suspicions. Yet she'd stake her life Cole hadn't fired that shot. It wasn't reasonable : first to try to kill a man and then to try to get a doctor across a flood river to save his life. Dake and Harge were all wrong.

As she and her father talked quietly, a riot burst out in the yard, or at least a riot as far as noise went, although it was merely Sandy Neil at work on a wagon, with five Mexicans as assistants. Between bellowed commands at the five, Sandy suddenly raised his voice in beat to his thudding hammer. Some inspiration had seized him : the words of the song that came out were entirely original. Which could not be claimed for the music : there was none.

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"This golrammed country have been tooken by a drouth," carolled Sandy. "We're leavin' for a new range ; cows done et this one out."

The Countess Berdoo, who had entered with a tray for the patient, stood listening in amazement, slowly repeating the words as Sandy sang the verse over again, evidently pleased with his composition.

"Did you hear what I heard ?" asked the Countess. "Shakespeare in cow-boy boots. 'This gol-rammed country havin' been tooken by a drouth, we're leavin' for a new range. Cows done et this one out.' 'Drouth' and 'out'—why, they almost rhyme !"

Nora laughed whole-heartedly for the first time in many days. Her dad was going to get well. She was going on the drive to Mexico, and her father was trusting her with the responsibility for it. Even Sandy's terrible song sounded like music to her ears. She was so happy that there was just one outlet for it : one of the solitary rides she often took.

At the corral she got one of her saddle string and jogged out into the early night. Soon she would be taking her last ride over this bosque range. Leaving this sun-tortured, wind-whipped land that had been her birth-place, where sand had covered the mesquite flats with mounds like so many graves. Leaving. They had been licked by the country, but what of it ? The Falconers were on their way to make a fresh start elsewhere.

The Rio drew her. A full red summer moon hung above the volcanic cones to the east, flooding the dwarf brush and chaparral with enchantment. When

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she saw the full moon again, she would be in a foreign land, one of soft-tongued language and clicking castanets, of new and strange foods, music, customs.

Mexico. The home of Cole Courtney. He had promised that he would see her again before she left for Mexico. Thinking of him, of that day when the Rio reached hungrily for them and he had laughed and flung it back, something took her along the bosque trail to the Armstrong ferry tower. It seemed weeks ago, after the sleepless, worried hours watching her father, but memory was still sharp of the young fellow who had conquered the river and had hastily disappeared. She would never forget him, that young rider who was the coolest man in the face of danger she had ever seen, to whom helping out strangers at risk of his life was so matter-of-course that perhaps he had already forgotten it.

Cochinello pods crackled under the hoofs of her horse as she came out on the river flats. The Rio was back to its usual size, a broad ribbon of calm water flowing between sand-bars. She stared at it. The Rio. A river to be loved, to be feared. Looking at the peaceful stream, she felt both sad and happy. Somehow it made her want suddenly to hear a voice, alive, vibrant, low-pitched, and to see a man she had seen but once.

A faint click of steel sounded in the distance as a little breeze stirred the mesquite brush. Hoofs padded along the river-bank, and through the shadows of the tall willows she caught a glimpse of a peaked white sombrero.

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Nora's heart was pounding foolishly. Cole Courtney. The stranger who had risked his life to bring a doctor to a man he had never seen. And the Kilgours claimed that a few hours before that stranger had tried to kill her father. It wasn't true.

He came up close, and as if he had expected to meet her there, merely nodded as he dismounted. The sorrel was breathing heavily, Nora noticed, as if he had been racing.

"That's the Rio for you," Courtney remarked. "Like a fool bronc that pitches like fury one day and is sober as a judge the next. Your father is better, I heard."

"Out of danger," she returned. "That—the other day—getting us over the river was as brave a thing as I ever saw."

It embarrassed him. "I don't look at it that way. You had to get across. Bravery is plumb cheap and plentiful. Down in Mexico I've seen men face firing-squads, and they never moved a muscle. That's what I'd call real courage. While we were in that fool river, there was no time to think of anything except getting out."

"You still have firing-squads in Mexico ?"

"Bless you, yes. It's often the penalty for losing an election or a revolution. Not a bad cure. Mexico is quite civilized in some ways. I've been wanting to see you, Miss Falconer. To warn you not to move your stock to Mexico just now. It's quiet now down there in the San Telmo country, but it's no place for Americans to come."

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"You came up here to bring this warning to my father?"

"Yes."

"Some of our neighbours suspect that you fired that shot at Father."

That reduced him to momentary silence. "The Kilgours?" he guessed. "That would be queer—my shooting at a man and not hitting him. What do you believe?" His voice was almost harsh.

She looked at him searchingly in the moonlight, and she was more sure than ever that he had not attempted that dastardly thing, firing at a man from ambush.

"You should know what I think," she said so fervently that Courtney's lean face lit up.

"They may be looking for you—our neighbours," she went on.

He laughed drily. "I happen to know that. I've just been chased by them. And why do they think I'd want to kill your father?"

"They say the Americans who lease our ranch don't want us to come down to use our share of the *Encantada* range.

"So that's what the Kilgours say?" he stated grimly. "And they're going with you on the drive—if you go. Which I'm hopin' you won't. You've got a lot of horses, good ones. And in a Mexican revolution horses are more important than guns. You see that river; it's quiet, innocent now as a child. That's the San Telmo country where the *Hacienda Encantada* lies, as it looks now. But up above along the Rio there may

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be floods a month or three months from now, and this river may be roaring. I've seen Mexico floods—we call them revolutions. They're plumb hell."

Nora watched his face, impassive usually, but expressive enough now as he delivered his warning. There was always somewhat of a hard cast to Courtney's face, even when he laughed, hardness coupled with a certain defiant recklessness. The face of a man who laughed as he faced death.

"There's no use in your trying to persuade us to stay," declared Nora. "We're going—and the Kilgours. We've got to. Father is to follow later. I could tell him what you have told me, but it would be no good."

"Maybe it is a little too much to believe—that I rode all the way up here to warn strangers?" he asked. "I don't blame you. I admit I didn't bring this warning to help you people. It's to help us: the people down in the San Telmo country, where this devil's mess is stewing. I could go into it further, but you couldn't see it. I knew it would do no good when I left. But at least there's no reason for your going into danger, Miss Falconer. You can stay with your father."

"One of the family has to go, and I'm the only one that can." Although he did not know it, the spell of the moonlight was helping Courtney make Nora half believe him. Against the magic of the night Nora had to fight with cold reason. She had to admit that she had met, for the first time in her life, a man who was stronger than she was, who possessed a strangely compelling power in his eyes, in his voice. Yet he

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could only argue hopelessly in trying to persuade her to stay. What had he to offer as proof of trouble? Nothing but vague fears of what might develop. He was up here on behalf of the American ranchers, some of whom at least had leased part of the *Hacienda Encantada* for their cattle.

"We're going," she said determinedly. "And if anyone gets in our way, I'll feel sorry for them. That's a warning to trade for yours."

"Have it your own way," he said gravely.

Feeling the force of his gravity, Nora had a sense of impending events in distant lands, as if fate were spinning a web, in the land of the eagle with the serpent in its claws, a romantic land but a cruel, relentless one.

"It's good-bye, then," he said. "And '*adios*', which means more. I mean that, although I'm not religious. 'Go with God', and may He go with you, Nora." His voice as he said her name for the first time was gentle. His hands came out to take hers. Regret was in his voice, matched by the sadness in her heart. This man, representing part of the enchantment of that alien land, she felt must be counted as an enemy, one who would wish them failure, who might work against them. And there was no place for sentiment in that conflict. She had to learn to hate this man, putting aside his bravery at the Rio.

Behind them a mesquite bush crackled and there came a hoarse voice. "Step aside, Nora; we got him covered!"

Harge Kilgour's voice. Courtney was trapped on the

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river-bank. To get to his horse he would have to cross a bare space.

"Step aside, Nora!" repeated Kilgour harshly, but the girl, acting solely from instinct, remained in front of Courtney, facing the brush.

"Fools," came Courtney's voice with a little chuckle, and then he turned swiftly. There was a splash in the river, followed by the roar of guns.

Harge Kilgour came rushing out from the brush screen, throwing his rifle to his shoulder as he scanned the water into which Courtney had flung himself. The gun crashed once, before Nora leaped forward to strike the barrel aside. Two other Kilgour riders followed but neither fired.

From the river came a faint cry. An arm uplifted above the reddish, luminous surface of the water and then disappeared. Kilgour echoed the cry with a triumphant squall, judging that the man had been mortally hit.

Fiercely Nora turned on Harge, to lash him with a tongue that had Falconer fire in it, that hurt like the blows of a quirt. And as Kilgour stepped back from that attack, there came from across stream, among the safety of the brush, three shrill whistles.

Courtney's saddled sorrel went by them with a rush, tapidero leathers popping, and promptly entering the water, swam across to his master.

Harge, realizing he had been tricked, raised his bull bellow and flung his rifle to his shoulder, intending to kill the swimming horse, setting Courtney afoot until he could be tracked down.

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Nora Falconer jerked her six-shooter from the saddle holster and levelled it at Kilgour.

"You shoot at that horse, Harge," she stated, her fury leashed under her cold voice, "and I'll shoot you."

Which proposition hardly seemed fair to Kilgour, that of a man's life for the life of a horse. No equality to it, but in the fire burning in the girl's eyes, he saw he had to accept her terms.

Harge cursed, but the rifle came away from his shoulder. He usually knew at a poker table before the cards were faced whether his hand was topped, whether he was facing a bluff or not. And likewise he now knew that when Nora Falconer used that tone it was no bluff.

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CHAPTER V

DISASTER TRAIL

BRAND FALCONER was carried in a wagon, padded with many mattresses, to the mining town of Chamberino, nestled in a green mountain canyon. There he was to stay with Sandy Neil's sister, who would probably lure Brand into overeating himself into indigestion with her good cooking.

At the last moment Brand had rebelled ; had talked querulously of going on to Mexico with them in a wagon, but the doctor had declared if Brand went along, a coffin might as well be carried, too, for it would be needed.

At the parting Nora's tears fell fast and her father had to comfort her.

"You're my son," he said, "and my son doesn't cry. It's nothing but a little *pasear* to new range. Shucks, Falconers never stay long in one place. We been vegetatin' in this Mesa Grande country. Down in Mexico, we'll have the same flag over us—in our hearts. We'll make a big stake, come back and buy the finest outfit in the U.S. You'll have Sandy and Lin and the rest, in case of trouble. But there'll be no touble."

"No trouble," Nora echoed positively, telling a white lie. Courtney had said there might be hell, but

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maybe he was only trying to scare a girl, showing her the canyon the big wolf went down, hoping to keep the Falconers off the range he and others had counted as their own. Yet, discounting the danger, she would be an alien among foreign people, where even the neighbours that were Americans were wanted men, desperadoes.

She was feeling low when she prepared to ride back to the Thirteenth Ranch. Her father, patting her shoulder, told her good-bye gruffly. "I'll be down there in six weeks. The Devil and fourteen bulldogs can't hold me here longer'n that." His cheerfulness was all put on; she knew why Brand had delayed leaving: his wife and his son were buried in a quiet cemetery at the ranch. They had fenced the plot, kept it clear of sand, but once they were gone, drift would cover those lonely graves.

But they did not leave the next day, nor the day after. As if giving them a jeering farewell, a tremendous wind-storm rose the night before they were to leave. Nora could hear the rush of the air currents, rising soon to a howling tempest. The air inside the adobe house became thick with dust. In the morning they could not at times see the corrals through the flying sand. All morning it blew in powerful gusts, filling the space between earth and sky with a great flowing river of dust, shrieking and whistling, piling great drifts of sand before the fences. Nothing to do but wait.

Sandy Neil in his toreador cap sat in the big kitchen,

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swapping yarns with the Countess Berdoo, both rolling innumerable cigarettes. Or sometimes they inveigled Mickey, orphan boy, son of a dead Falconer rider, into a poker game, shamelessly cheating him, "to learn him", declared Sandy in a fatherly mood, "to take keer of hisself when he runs ag'inst tinhorns".

All that day they were overwhelmed in murky clouds, and the Mexican woman swept their rooms continually, getting rid of the small drifts that were built up through the minute cracks of the doors and windows. Sand piled on windows-sills ; it got between the sheets of the beds. The huge yucca in the yard, standing like a flagpole, with a green tuft of spikes at the top, swayed in the wind, held by its sturdy roots. They tried to be cheerful, but the inactivity was bad medicine.

Nora had a wild eagerness to be moving. Sometimes she thought they would be covered here by the sand, held like the court of the Sleeping Princess in the legend. Everyone likewise was on edge except the Countess Berdoo who talked on coolly in her mannish voice. Sand-storms, this trip—all was an experience, and the Countess lived for experiences. Calmly she did her calisthenics, took her bath before the evening meal.

"Got to keep feeling fit," she stated. "Don't let down. Like the Englishmen out in the jungle dressing for dinner and all that."

"Fit, huh ?" snorted Sandy. "How could anybody feel fit in this ? Fit fer what ? I feel fit t' be tied.

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Whut's there to be fit fer? I got enough sand a'redy in my gizzard to grind a beefsteak."

One day was bad enough, two worse, three unbearable. No use even of sending word to the Kilgours that they would not start. The tall yucca swayed in the high wind, as a flag of defiance, of courage even. Hour after hour the storm raged on, and as they breathed the smothering air, they stared at each other owlishly through the haze of the room. Sometimes in the kitchen in defiance they sang songs, sad ones, cow-boy dirges—"When the Work's All Done This Fall", "Bad Companions", the "Cow-boy's Lament".

Three nights and three days of wind, and then as suddenly as it had come the storm ceased. Stars dotted the sky again, although the air still tasted faintly of dust. Nora slept peacefully, and then it was an hour before dawn and the ranch was alive with voices, Sandy's mostly, bellowing orders. A messenger had been sent to the Kilgour ranch, and one to the horse range in the mountains, telling Lin Button to start his bunch angling down to meet them thirty miles along the route.

The night faded slowly as the girl stood in the doorway of her room, waiting to look for the last time at dawn on the Rio. From the river came a sudden yapping of coyotes, then the air was still, hushed, until from the bosque came the startling notes of a trumpet.

The activity of the house and yards stopped; people quit whatever they were doing to listen to the trumpet, giving out a short succession of notes, sharp, clear,

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challenging. It was repeated once, then there was silence and the mocking voices of the coyotes.

Sandy pointed into the house. "Now what in the golrammed darnation is that?" he demanded. "And whut kind o' a insterment tootlin' an' why? Harrumph!

"I got it!" he bawled. "Ever seen any bull-fights? No? Well, they divide their fights in sorta different acts. First the bull comes rampagin' in to toss the horses around. That's one part. Then the fellers sticks in the bander—iller—the banderillererer—you know what I mean. Then there's a trumpet gives a signal for the matador t' come in with a hunk o' red flannel underwear an' a sword, an' kill the bull. An' that's the music that tooter just give—the part for the killin' of the bull. Say, yuh reckon it might o' had anything to do with that matador whut run off with my pants I won off him?"

Nora laughed. "Hardly. You better forget him, Sandy. Mexico's a big place."

"No place can be big enough to keep me from meetin' that feller," declared Sandy.

The mystery of the trumpet call was not explained, and they had no time to investigate. Nora, looking out across the river, turned her gaze to the yard and found something missing: the great yucca that had long been a landmark. It had gone down during the night, and lay with its long length stretched on the ground.

A little chill came to Nora. Was that an omen of disaster? You couldn't live in this country and not absorb some of the superstition of the desert people.

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And what was the meaning of that trumpet? She shivered.

Men were hurrying about in the darkness. Breakfast was over. The Countess rolled a corn-husk cigarette. Bill Leaf and Tommy Fitton, grizzled old-timers, the Mexican *vaqueros* and two Yaqui riders, had gone out to start the cattle herd. Babies wailed. Horses whickered. Chains rattled as the mules were brought out to be hitched to the high canvas-topped wagons.

Sandy Neil on his big *gruya* pulled up by the house. "Boss, all's ready," he reported.

The boy, Mickey, had saddled her mount, and Nora swung into the saddle. Her horse, one of the Morgan-Arabian strain bred in the brushy mountain range by her father, reared beneath her, eager to start. They waited on her, and her heart jerked out of the sadness of a parting. Responsibility for this venture rested on her; resolutely she faced it.

"*Andale!*" she said briefly, and Sandy rode forward shouting the old command of the wagon trains: "Stretch out!" Whips popped. Wagons rumbled. The girl paused on the hill briefly to lift her hand to the ranch below. Falconers looked ahead. . . .

As the sun pushed up, behind them came the cattle column, snuffing at the dry grass whose tufts arose above the drifted sands.

Mickey, wiggling with delight, galloped up on a shaggy little mouse-coloured pony. The boy had an ancient six-shooter slung on a hip.

"Where to, Mickey?" the girl asked him. "War?"

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"*Seguro*," he said. "There is always war in Mexico. Revolutions, bandits. And Sandy says he's a-goin' to start a war if we don't find one. Goin' to get back that pair of toreador pants that he won."

All the riders had carbines and six-shooters. A hundred rounds of ammunition for the rifles were in the wagons, and that, as Sandy said, could stretch out into quite a ruckus.

Sandy himself thundered up on his big, hard-mouthed *gruya*. The face under his lop-eared hat was filled with consternation.

"Dad blast it," he roared, "today's Friday. Movin' out on Friday! We ought t' bust every lookin'-glass in them wagons so's we'll be certain shore we'll never git there."

In mid-morning Harge Kilgour came galloping over a ridge. "We're off," he said exultantly. "Our stuff is movin' out. Join you beyond Pagosa Springs. Movin' out of this damned country at last." He said nothing of the attempt to kill Courtney at the river, and the girl let it pass.

"I don't know," she said, "that this country deserves swearing at. It was all right before we ranchers took it over. We didn't understand it. We overloaded it like Mexicans overload pack-horses. The country ought to be damning us, Kilgour."

Harge looked curiously at her, not understanding. A practical man, Harge, who only saw that the country had gone back on them and was therefore to be cursed.

"You're a queer one, Nora," he remarked. "A little too deep for me in some ways. And I'm shore glad

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you're stringin' along. I'll look after yuh, but o' course I c'd do it better if you'd went as Mrs. Harge Kilgour. But there's plenty o' time. Plenty o' preachers and priests in Old Mexico."

What they were crossing was literally a desert, whose surface soil was whipped to and fro by the wind. They passed across the range of one rancher whose cows had literally been starved to death; carcasses lay in a heap near the corrals. Thank the Lord, their cattle were strong enough to move. The weak ones had been sold. Brand Falconer had always maintained if he couldn't provide feed for a cow he would sell it, and if he couldn't sell it, he would use a gun or pole-axe to put the animal out of its misery.

They camped that night at Pagosa Springs, still on their own range. The next day the Kilgours would join them with their cattle, horses, and wagons. Still farther on Lin Button would bring up the Falconer horses. Once these so-called springs had been a small lake with a strong stream flowing from it; now there was barely enough for one watering. Dolefully Sandy muttered his improvised song as they bedded down the herd:

"This dadblamed country havin' been took by the drouth
We're headin' for a new range; cows done et this one out."

He finished in a long-drawn wail which made the Countess Berdoo stop her ears.

On the next day the Kilgours pulled in with their wagons. Nora was startled. They had ten big wagons such as the army used, canvas-covered and

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pulled by six and eight mules. One wagon would have been enough for the household effects of the bachelor Kilgours. And yet all these wagons were plainly heavily loaded.

"Grain," explained Harge Kilgour without being asked, as he gestured towards the vehicles. "We want to be sure we git down there. We brought a few extra horses to take down, and we don't want to starve 'em."

Which was queer also; the Kilgours had never worried before about graining their horses, letting them starve through as best they could. The Kilgour cattle swung in to join the Falconer column, while the other Kilgour riders hazed the horse herd down. They had not bought a few extra horses, but a lot, three hundred head of geldings, to add to the hundred fifty they had owned. To take care of these Kilgour had employed a bunch of new riders, hard-looking men.

During the drive Harge rode often by Nora Falconer's side, trying to get himself into her good graces again. This pretty girl with the burnished copper hair plainly was Harge's idea of the sort of woman he was entitled to, but as plainly he did not know how to court her. He did not realize she was all business now; his clumsy compliments, his would-be witticisms had no effect except to annoy her.

On the next day there was a pound of hoofs, wild yells, a long column of dust and wild whickering. With streaming tails and manes, their eyes like jewels, the Morgan horses with Arabian cross of Brand Falconer came charging down out of the hills. They made a sight Nora would never forget, of the solid colours to

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which Morgans run, bays mostly and sorrels, a few chestnuts and blacks. The stallions from the herd had been kept back, would be brought on later. Lin Button, in charge of them, rode up to Nora's side, and the eyes of both glowed with pride as they watched the horses pass.

"They is too cussed good fo' Mexico," said Lin. Button was a Texan and in him had been bred a hatred of the country below the Border. "And too good to be throwed in with thet Kilgour bunch of broomtails," he added contemptuously. "Looks like they-all was goin' in the hoss business with all they bought."

When the Falconer and Kilgour horses were flung together, they and the cattle of both ranches and the heavy wagons made a procession that looked like an entire county on the move. The horses were hazed on a parallel course with the cattle, a couple of miles away, for the sake of the poor grazing the land allowed. They would travel west for nearly a week, to turn south to the Border and on through a mountain range to the San Telmo country in which lay the *Hacienda Encantada.*

During that week nothing of consequence happened, and at last, ready to turn south, they topped out on a low comb of hills to see below them the distant peaks of a mountain range in Mexico. Lying between them and the mountains was a great barren oasis, with low, baked, scorched hills rising from it. There was not a sign of habitation in the basin ; no sign of life.

"Thought we was livin' in the desert country," said Sandy, a little awed. "But that was Paradise on earth 'longside this stretch."

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They had the route surveyed out, the few water-holes, but before they got to the mountains there would be nearly a three-day dry drive. At the last watering-place they stopped a day. During the night barrels were filled and lashed to the sides of the wagons.

In the morning they pulled through a low pass and headed south on alkali flats where the glare blistered their faces. Pushing on, they came to a water-hole which was bitter, unusable, near a little settlement of deserted houses. Skeletons of cattle and horses lay everywhere, partly buried by drifting sand. The ranch-houses had long been abandoned and the sand had piled in to fill the rooms.

The next day disaster struck them, a storm that rose out of a clear, peaceful morning, to become a howling hurricane. Before the powerful sweep of that gale, the wagons had to come to a stop. The sun was a pale glow in the dusty sky. A few drops of muddy rain splashed down, but for the most part the storm was unchanging in its savage assault. Great whirling clouds of sand whipped about them, penetrated neckerchief masks, choking them, penetrating their clothes. The horse herd was held on its original course for a while, and then they swung to the side. Likewise the cattle drifted, and there was no stopping them. It was like facing a blizzard.

Nora was in the saddle with the men trailing the horses, riding through the long, howling hours. They lost all contact with the wagons. The herds of horses and cattle, far separate, each shifted for itself. The trail drivers moving helplessly with the herds realized

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that they were getting far off the course that led to water.

They had been so many hours in the saddle that they had no realization of time, had almost lost sense of direction, since the wind had shifted more than once. When it died to occasional gusts, the cattle and horse columns were found to be only a few miles apart.

The riders' canteens being exhausted, they sent out riders to hunt the wagons. The wagons would be little better off : although they had not moved from the place where the wind had first struck them, the water-barrels would be running dry.

Disaster faced them unless they found water. The distance back to the original route through the mountains would be too far for them to reach the water-holes they would have made the third day had not the storm struck.

Lin Button came up, his face grim. "The hosses," he said hoarsely, "we got to git 'em out. I heard o' water in heah some place, a lake back up a canyon."

No one in the train knew of the lake : it seemed a mirage, a tall yarn. They could only go on, riding hard to keep the thirst-crazed horses from scattering. Sometimes Nora Falconer found herself murmuring a prayer, not for herself but for the poor, dumb brutes. She was numb with fatigue, the beating of the storm.

The fallen yucca in the ranch yard had been a symbol of the downfall of the Falconer fortunes. She would

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have to go back and tell her father that she had lost his herds, his fine horses, his cattle.

As many men as could be spared rode out to hunt water, the lake Lin Button mentioned, any water, but one by one they straggled back, their hopeless faces confessing failure.

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CHAPTER VI

A WESTERN PIED PIPER

THEY halted the drift of the horses in mid-afternoon and wearily circled the restless animals, holding them loose-herded. They knew they could not keep them together much longer ; that night in the darkness the animals would scatter for all the riding that could be done. Then, wandering in small bands across the wasteland in a vain quest for water, they would inevitably perish and leave their skeletons across a fifty-mile square of country.

Suffering themselves from lack of water, almost as desperate as the horses, the trail riders avoided each other's eyes, fearing to see there the horrible truth which they all realized—that they were beaten.

After the storm it had turned glaringly hot and the baked earth angrily reflected back the intensity of the sun. The creak of saddle leather as Nora urged on her horse faded in her ears. Shutting her eyes, the girl told herself that she must be dreaming all this. In reality she was back on the Mesa Grande ranch, slowly awakening from a dream that they had started out to meet the disaster of a great dust-storm which had drifted them far from their course.

Yes, that was it ; they were still at the Thirteenth

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Ranch, just getting ready to start. Back there on the last morning, hearing the coyotes and the strange trumpet call that Sandy said was the signal summoning the matador in bull-rings in Mexico to the performance of the last act of the drama : the killing of the bull.

Amazingly now she was hearing that trumpet call again, too vividly to be merely imagining it. She raised her head and saw the hateful desert shimmering in the sun. No dream this, but neither were the faint notes that came from a distant bugle or trumpet. The other riders were staring as she was, hunting the source of that call, the same one they had heard sounded on the morning of their departure.

They found it on a distant loaf-shaped hill in the person of a solitary horseman who sat on the elevation, holding something before him that glittered in the sunlight—the instrument with which he had sounded the call. He was riding a white horse, and as they looked towards him, they saw the rider wave his arm, gesturing them undoubtedly to follow. Then he turned his animal and rode down the other side of the hill.

"Now whut?" demanded Sandy as he pulled up beside Nora. "Wants us to foller, does he? Whut for? Why'n't he ride up like a gent an' state his business, if any?"

"It might be that he wants to show us where there is water," said Nora.

"Whut's to keep the crazy galoot from comin' up an' sayin' so?" growled Sandy. "Water! They ain't none for a hundred miles from here in all the directions they is, includin' straight up an' down."

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"It won't do any harm to follow," Nora insisted. Some intuition was telling her that the rider wanted to help them.

Nora, Sandy, Harge Kilgour and two others rode out at once. Topping the hill where they had seen the rider, they found him jogging on without looking back, as if certain that they would follow. He was heading straight south towards a low range of greenish-black hills, made in ages past by the volcanic overflow from a high crater.

"They ain't no water that-away," growled Harge. "I rode there myself t'day. Cuss him, I'll fix his clock." And Harge who had been able to do nothing but curse their predicament, flung his rifle to his shoulder. He probably had no intention of shooting, but one never could be certain about Harge. They made him lower the gun and rode on, like a group of children following a Pied Piper.

Straight towards the craggy little black hills he rode, and reaching them, turned in the saddle and once more waved them on. Then mysteriously horse and rider disappeared.

"Told yuh," snarled Kilgour. "We better look out for trouble. Looks like a ambush to me."

But when they got to the spot where they had last seen the rider, they saw a bit of red silk tied to a dead yucca stalk, and the tracks of the white horse, leading through brush into a rock-bottomed shallow ravine. Hidden from the casual eye by the growth of brush, the ravine by a twisting course wound back towards the heart of the little hills.

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Ahead of them after a few hundred yards the rock trough widened, and in the gloomy depths of a small canyon ahead they saw the dull shimmer of water. Their horses, which had been whickering restlessly, suddenly went forward at a lope, not stopping until they stood knee-deep in a little crystal-clear lake into which they buried their noses deep, disregarding bridle bits.

"Water!" croaked Sandy unbelievingly. "Kick me, somebuddy, so's I'll be sure I'm awake. No, I got a better way." With which Sandy plopped into the pool like a frog and came up dripping wet.

"Smells like water, looks like water, tastes like water—must be water," proclaimed Sandy, and suddenly they were all laughing and talking at once, dipping up the water in their hands, splashing one another.

They rode around the pool, but the tracks of the rider were lost in the rocky hillside. Evidently he had ridden out by some labyrinthine passage, leaving them not the slightest idea as to his indentity. He had always been too far from them to tell whether he was even American or Mexican, and none of them had happened to be carrying field-glasses on their saddles.

They hurried back and brought up the horses. It would be a job taking them up in bands to the pool. When they were done watering them, it would be the cattle herd's turn. A messenger was sent to the wagons to act as guide. Some of the lighter wagons would come on ahead, to get barrels of water to take back to the thirsty people and teams.

For two days they stayed encamped below the lava

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hills, resting, letting the horses and cattle forage as they could from the desert brush.

They never tired of guessing at the identity of the rider who had saved them. If they had been told it was the patron saint of trail drivers who had appeared in the form of an angel riding a white horse, they would probably have believed it, for only something supernatural seemingly could explain the miracle of the hidden lake.

Nora, thinking of Cole Courtney, thought that she could make a guess, but she had no evidence. It all had to be left finally to the credit of some unknown guardian who had been following them ever since they left Mesa Grande, for mysterious reasons of his own.

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CHAPTER VII

MOONLIT STAMPEDE

A FEW days after the finding of water by the Falconers, Cole Courtney was sitting with nine of his below-the-Border rancher neighbours in a grassy little cup of the Tortugas Mountains. From where they were camped they could see the canvas covers of the wagons and the Falconer-Kilgour trail herds, both horses and cattle.

It was near sunset. The mounts of the ten men were hobbled out, grazing near by. All the ranchers were Americans, of varied ages, sizes. Three were the owners of the big Knight Land & Cattle Company ; the rest were individual ranchers like Cole Courtney, with holdings that were small for Mexico where five thousand cattle is counted a small outfit.

The men had just arrived, bringing a few pack-mules with chuck, blankets, kegs of water. Cole had been waiting for them here.

"Didn't have a chance of stoppin' 'em before they started, eh ?" asked Stacy Knight, one of three hard-bitten, leather-faced brothers.

"Nope. Butted against a stone wall. Somebody had shot Falconer and the Kilgours suspected me of the trick. Takes more oratory than I got, to argue with people who think you might be a dry-gulcher. I was

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on the dodge most of the time up there. Couldn't have done no good. They're burned out: got to go somewhere. They had their minds made up to come, hell or high water, revolution or no revolution."

Old Eli Burson whose ranch a few years back had been looted, his entire family wiped out in a raid by a rebel-bandit renegade, growled suddenly.

"If I'd 'a' been sent up there," he declared, "I'd of potted a few men to give 'em a taste of what a revolution's like in Mexico. Cole, we got to stop that bunch, or the horses, anyway. Have to scatter them *caballos* all the way from hell to breakfast. What you argurin' ag'in it for? They're bedded down just right for us—horses separate from the rest o' the outfit. What's to keep us from spreadin' 'em over the malpais country? It'd take 'em three months for the gather."

"What they could gather, in that malpais," said Courtney. "What would be left? Those people, Eli, are Americans," he pointed out quietly.

"We're Americans, too, even if we're roostin' in Greaserland," said Bill Horn, a wintry-moustached little man with the rumbling voice of a giant. "Got our families and ranches at stake. We're settin' on a keg o' powder. If that bunch o' renegade Mexes in San Telmo git started, nobody'd give us thirty cents for our lives or outfits. Goddlemighty, Court, what yuh hangin' back for?"

Courtney was still. They were right. All the argument he had was a girl who had flung herself between him and bullets from the guns of the Kilgours who

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suspected him of murder. A girl that he had seen for perhaps half an hour at most.

"All we're doin', Court, is to scatter 'em in that bad land stretch beyond the gap," argued Horn. "They can gather most of 'em again."

"In that wild country they'll gather maybe half of 'em," returned Courtney. "If they can stay here long enough. They got no feed to round up on."

"Anyway they'll have their cattle left to take on to the *Encantada*," argued Horn. "And enough horses to work 'em. They won't have their horses long down in Mexico anyway. An' we won't kill nobody on this stampede——"

"Unless you have to," added Courtney.

One of the younger men, Lon Kimberly, yawned. He was rawboned, lank, hatchet-faced, and his shoulders had an abnormal width. With his brother, Lee, he leased land from the *Hacienda Encantada.*

"I'm bettin'," he said insultingly, "that Court, he's run across the red-head that owns part of those horses. I seen her in the glasses from where I took a look-see. She's a beaut, that *muchacha.* If she lands in Mexico, I hope a revolution does come up. Mebbe I'll turn revolutionist long enough to carry her off. She can be my *soldadera* in any war."

Kimberly laughed coarsely, but broke it off as a tiger leaped at him in the shape of Cole Courtney. Kimberly stepped fast trying to dodge, but his head snapped back before the driving impetus of a blow, just before his lank body toppled and fell.

At Lon's side his brother, Lee, went for a gun, but

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Courtney, knowing the brothers helped each other in fights, flashed about, his own gun whipping up from its holster. The two Kimberlys, wanted in Texas for murder, thought of a fight in terms of guns, when they could get the drop.

"S'posin', Courtney, you let a man know you're goin' to hit him," Lon snarled as he got to his feet.

"That was only an invite," said Courtney softly. "To a fight, if you want it. Next time, we'll make it guns to start with. And you keep your ugly mouth sewed up when you throw talk about a girl you don't know."

"I knowed that was it," jeered Lon Kimberly. "Wants to save that girl's *caballos*."

"Be sensible, Court," said Bill Horn. "I got a daughter o' my own below. I don't want her mixed in a revolution. No more than I'd want to see this girl, or any American girl, ridin' down into a corner of hell. If this stampede turns 'em back or holds 'em up until the affair's settled below, so much the better for that red-head."

"We don't know for sure that things will boil over," argued Courtney. "The Federals in San Telmo have had plenty notice she's brewin'."

"Yeah," admitted one of the Knight brothers. "But who says the Federals that got that notice ain't mixed in the revolution? Major Ontra, *commandante* at San Telmo, for one. But let 'er get started with American horses and we'll get the blame from the government. Yuh know what that means—bein' tromped on by both sides. Court, the vote's ag'in

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yuh. We're pullin' this stampede. But no close shootin' ; don't even shoot no horses 'less yuh have to."

Lon Kimberly laughed. "What if there is somebody killed by accident? We don't owe these folks anything."

"They're Americans," old Bill Horn said slowly. "Folks from our country. Some of you'll grin like baboons at that—those of yuh mebbe that can't go back. Me, I can't go back myself, but I'm admittin' I'd shore like to."

One of the Kimberlys snorted. "What is this—the fourth July? Give us a speech, old rooster, and then we'll stand while we whistle the 'Star Spangled Banner'."

"Sometimes it might be good for yuh Kimberlys to hear it played while someone made yuh stand on yore hind laigs and take off yore hats," snapped Bill Horn. Horn was wanted back in Colorado, and Horn wasn't his name. The old fellow would have given the remaining years of his life to live one among the snow-covered peaks of the Rockies.

Courtney looked at them. Excepting the Kimberlys, he liked them all. A hard bunch, true, but Mexico changed people. Down in *Mañanaland* the Americans had no real country, were always aliens. Some had taken Mexican wives, but all of them dreamed of a day when they might go back to live above the Border. A hard bunch, but underneath men who loved the land from which they were exiles. And they were right in their plan to stampede the Falconer and Kilgour horses. Strong medicine, but it had to be administered. He said nothing more in objection. Better for Nora

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Falconer that she lose her horses than be tossed into the maelstrom of a Mexican uprising.

Evening dropped slowly, and as the bull-bats swooped overhead and gave out their mysterious calls, the riders stirred. Time to be moving. Mounting, they descended to the moonlit flat. The siren of a lobo rose as a discord on the silent night. Bill Horn, appointed leader in the stampede, divided his men.

The camp of the horse drivers and the camp of the teamsters near which the cattle were bedded were over a mile apart. Between them Courtney was assigned a patrol and the job of keeping off any riders from the wagon and cattle camp who might race to help turn the horses back from the gap which was the goal of the stampeders. Once out of that gap, there was nothing to prevent the horses from scattering in an almost impenetrable wilderness of malpais country.

Reaching his position midway between the two camps, Cole waited on a brushy hill. His sorrel, *Mañana*, pawed impatiently. Bill Horn was putting on the stampede in military fashion, had set a minute when the rush was to start.

It was still as only desert country can be, broken only by the faint songs of the men on night guard at the cattle herd. The moon was smothered by a drifting pack of white clouds which passed over slowly. Courtney looked at his watch. Still five minutes.

As the moon cleared the clouds, a rider loomed up not far from him, jogging from the wagon camp where the dying cook fires made little flickering points of light. Courtney, standing in a brush clump with his horse,

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watched the rider come near, intending to let him pass unchallenged. There was no object in stopping him. Not, at least, until to his amazement he identified the slim person in the saddle.

Leaving his horse, he stepped out at once into the open.

"Nora!" he called amazedly, and she turned her horse to come towards him. She seemed happy to see him again, holding out her hand, smiling. Everything was lost to Cole except the fact that he was seeing Nora Falconer again.

"Cole Courtney," she said in a tone lightly scolding, "you're a fraud. You told me that you were going to try your darnedest to keep us from reaching Mexico. And instead you helped us out. You weren't riding your sorrel, but I knew it was you who guided us to that lake of water."

"Sorry, Nora," he said, "but it wasn't. I didn't know about any lake in this country, for one thing. Nor did I know that you were in trouble. I've just made a quick trip to San Telmo."

"Then who could it have been?" Nora asked perplexed.

"I don't know what hombre showed you water when you needed it. I'd have done as much, for I wouldn't see horses even of an enemy die of thirst. I could make a guess, but it might be wrong. I only know that down in the San Telmo country hell is waiting to break loose, and your horses are what will open the door. You don't savvy Mexico, living up where it's safe. Down below, being an American is like

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walking a tight rope. When revolutions come, no matter who wins, the Americans always lose."

He thought suddenly of the men waiting to stampede the horses, looked at his watch again. Two minutes. No, less than a minute.

"You'll have to look on me as an enemy, Nora," he stated. "And as an enemy I can tell you now that you'll not get your horse herd into Mexico."

"What do you mean ?"

He felt a great pity for Nora Falconer, but that pity queerly made him suddenly harsh. "I mean just what I say. I warned you not to start. I told you that you had no business to bring them down. And now after tonight you'll always think of me as an enemy. Nora, listen, there's still time. If you'll promise to go back with the horses, I can save them. If you don't, you'll lose most of them, maybe all. Tell me you'll turn back and wait until it's safe. Try to see our side."

She stared at him, her chin tilted stubbornly. "No, we won't go back. You can't scare us, no matter what you try to do. Why don't you try to see our side ? We simply can't go back. We've nowhere to go."

Cole gave up. His hand came out to fasten on the rein of her bridle. "Have it your own way," he said. "But your horses will never get to the San Telmo country."

"You mean you'd stampede them ?" she guessed suddenly. " You and your neighbours ?"

"What does it sound like we're doing ?" he returned as a gun roared below, followed by a crash of firing that came like claps of thunder rolling over the brushy flats.

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On the heels of the explosions came a rumbling, the pound of many hoofs, broken by the wild clatter of bells. The ranchers from Mexico had planned to turn belled animals loose in the herd.

"Let me go!" the girl ordered and spurred her horse hard, but Courtney held to the rein. Below them Nora could see a dark flood moving, a great river of running horses. On the sides of their stream came the tiny flashes of guns whose unceasing explosions punctuated a din made up of jangling bells, popping fire-crackers, and the wild yells of riders.

"Let me go!" she cried again and lifted her quirt. The lash slapped down over the brim of Courtney's hat, but the next frantic blow flicked his cheek, stinging it with all the pain of a red-hot iron. That failing, Nora spurred her horse to a wild plunging. The animal reared so high that Courtney, afraid lest the animal go over backwards and crush its rider, turned loose.

At once Nora whirled her mount, to ride towards the stream of racing horses and into the danger of flying bullets.

Courtney ran back to his horse, to fling himself into the saddle and spur off on a hot pursuit. The horse the girl rode was one of the best in the Falconer remuda, but Courtney's *Mañana* sorrel came from blooded horses to race long distances. *Mañana* was winner of many a four-mile race, a favourite length for running horses in Mexico.

Meanwhile the river of horses moved on with the ranchers from Mexico whooping on the flanks. By

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dangerous riding they were keeping the leaders turned away from the encircling horseshoe of mountain range, pointed straight towards the gap leading to the bad-lands where a large horse herd could be lost.

The girl, Cole Courtney saw as he spurred after her, was riding straight into the path of the leaders, racing over the rough, treacherous ground, hoping to head them from the gap. He feared that her horse would fall, and then half-hoped that the animal would, preferring to have her take chances on escaping a fall rather than trying to stem that tide of terror-stricken horse-flesh. Slowly *Mañana* pulled up even with her, and Courtney reached out for the head-stall of her mount's bridle. She pulled away, but inexorably *Mañana* closed in, and this time Cole's hand fastened in iron grip on the plaited rawhide, down close to the bit. And again the girl's quirt rained blows at him.

Handicapped by the hand on the bridle, Nora's horse stumbled over a bush and fell to his knees. Cole, checking *Mañana*, swept the girl from the saddle while her horse, recovering, ran on wildly, swinging stirrups clattering against the saddle.

Nora Falconer struggled against Courtney futilely until he let her free. Ignominiously she had been set afoot, while at the side the thudding hoofs of the panic-stricken horses drummed along the bottom of an arroyo that would bring them inevitably up a slope and out through the pass into the bad-lands. The riders from Mexico who had started the stampede were being left behind, but their work was done.

The moon which had been flirting with the clouds

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broke free and showed the racing herd clearly. At the sight the girl burst into a storm of tears. She had lost, and she was too overcome to tell Cole Courtney what she thought of him.

Courtney looked down soberly at her, and then turned to look at the horses. The weeping of this girl was like a knife thrust in his body. It was more than he could stand. Cursing silently, he rowelled *Mañana* savagely and in a wild clatter of hoofs raced down the steep side of the arroyo, over brush and loose piles of stone.

Behind him the girl, ceasing her sobbing, stared in amazement. For Courtney was headed plainly to do an amazing thing : to try to turn the horse herd away from the pass, to send it back into the encircling mountain ring. To save it !

He had only a desperate chance to win ; a far greater chance to lose his life. If his horse should fall in the path of the leaders of the crazy-mad herd, he would be trampled by their hoofs to a shapeless pulp of bone and blood.

Nothing apparently could stop the insane flight of the horses, even an adobe wall barring their path, yet deliberately the man was racing to make the attempt, passing along the flank on the flying sorrel. As he pushed up even with the leaders, he began shouting, adding the bark of his six-shooter to the yells.

One chance in a thousand to turn that frenzied bunch. To have even that chance, the rider had to better the speed of the leaders in the rough bottom of the arroyo. It was no time to be merciful : he shot two of the leaders

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and the others pressed away from the crazy demon in the saddle in a desperate effort to outrace their new tormentor. The stout-hearted *Mañana*, making a final effort, shot ahead and the horses swung definitely to the left, back towards the horseshoe made by the encirling mountain range. *Mañana* had won.

Courtney pulled up his panting horse and, hunched in his saddle, wearily watched the flood of horses sweep back to the great mountain corral. He had played traitor to his friends and neighbours, for the sake of a girl. Men had been shot for a smaller betrayal than that. And while he sat his saddle, a rider swept in behind him, Lin Button, who had been in his blankets when the stampede started and had sprung to the bare back of the fastest horse in camp. Coming on Cole suddenly, the Texan levelled his gun.

Lin's voice was hoarse with rage as he ordered Cole to put up his hands. Those Falconer Morgan-Arabians were Lin's life, and under the nose of his pistol was one of the men who had helped run them off. An itch was in Button's forefinger to pull the trigger.

"I ort t' shoot yuh out'n the saddle, yuh sneakin' skulker!" Lin growled. "But I want to see yuh done for right. I crave t' see yuh kick in hossthief style."

Cole put up his hands; he could not hope to fool that lynx-eyed little Texan. He was almost past caring what happened to him. Other men pounded up to join Lin. They disarmed Courtney and tied his hands behind him, then part prepared to ride to the main camp with the prisoner. The rest meanwhile were sent

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to hold the horses in the horseshoe made by the mountains. No small job, for it is harder to quiet the equine kind, once stampeded, than cattle, and it would take hard, fast riding to loose-herd the animals the rest of the night.

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CHAPTER VIII

LEY DE FUGA

WITH his grim-faced escort, Lin Button, Harge and old Dake Kilgour and Sandy Neil, Courtney came to the wagon camp. Another rider had caught Nora's loose horse, and she galloped in just as the party arrived.

Stopping near the fire, Harge Kilgour pulled Courtney roughly from his saddle. Keeping his feet by an effort the cow-boy faced a circle of hostile faces.

"Wimmen and kids bettuh git 'way from heah," growled Lin at the half-dressed audience. "We-all should of took him down to the hoss camp wheah they's on'y men. Whut these wimmen'll see heah won't be pretty."

"Are women supposed to see only pretty things?" queried the sprightly Countess Berdoo. "I wonder then why the Lord made men for us to look at?" she continued sweetly. "So we're to see something not so pretty here? Can you mean a lynching? How does the poet put it? 'It is not sweet with nimble feet, to dance upon the air.' But surely, Lin, this can't be the victim. Not this positively handsome young fellow. It would be a crime against all womankind and a-hem—against future generations—to hang a man like that. Or, as you Westerners so picturesquely say it, to stretch his neck."

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Courtney, listening to the Countess, grinned a little. "Ma'am, this is a time when one sure appreciates compliments," he told her gratefully. "I hope my neck isn't the kind that stretches much, and for your sake I'll do my best to keep it under control."

"A gallant lad, mark you, gentlemen," said the Countess, who in girlhood had wandered entranced through the romantic volumes of Sir Walter Scott. "A regular Sir Galahad in chaps."

"A reg'lar cussed hossthief," burst out Dake Kilgour. "His gang all but got away with scatterin' them hosses to hell-an'-gone. That wagon we fixed up with the high beam and pulley to h'ist beeves we butchered—it'll do to dangle him from. Jingoes, that's the same feller an' sorrel seen near where Brand Falconer's horse was shot. Le's have a look on his rifle. Yeh, just as we figured. A Sharp's .40–.70. Plenty of them rifles down in Mexico, tooken there by Texas outlaws that never dast go back home to buy more up-to-date guns. That cinches it."

"I dunno about his shootin' at Brand," said Sandy Neil, "but shore's a feller needs a drink o' water occasional in hell, he was in the outfit that jumped our horses. From Mexico, is he? In that case, 'cordin' to the custom of his country, he ought to be shot ag'in a 'dobe wall. I've seen men hung before, but I ain't seen none shot before a 'dobe wall."

"We'll build yuh a 'dobe wall so's yuh see something new," growled Harge Kilgour. "We ought to tie him on a bronc bareback and turn the hoss loose to kill him by inches. That'd be a new stunt."

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"Why, my dear man," exclaimed the Countess, "that is an ancient method that the Cossacks used centuries ago to put men to death."

Nora Falconer who had dismounted stood staring at the rider. Her mind was a turmoil. She had seen the prisoner turn single-handed the mad rush of the horses. He belonged to the party that had started the stampede, but at the last moment he had relented, turning against his friends. And she knew why. For her. Because he loved her, she thought with an exultant pride that drowned out the anger she felt at his having been in a plot to capture or scatter the horse herd. He loved her, as she loved him. No use in trying to deny it. Unreasoningly she loved this Cole Courtney, who belonged to a gang who were probably plain horse-thieves.

She had loved him she realized ever since they had met. When she had felt his strong arms about her in the flooded Rio, another stream had swept her irresistibly into far more turbulent currents. She had always imagined love to be a slow growth, based on a respect for the loved one. That theory had to be discarded. There had been no growth to her love for this man: it had just come. And so strongly that even if he had not relented to turn the horses, she doubted if her love would have changed to hatred. In the Falconer family had been more than one black sheep member. Something even in his very lawlessness called to some rebellious strain in her.

But while she stood turning all this over, his captors were condemning him to death. Impetuously she stepped into the little group.

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"Yu're all mistaken," she burst out. "He saved the horses from running through the gap. Rode after them, and turned them. I saw it all."

"You're mistook, Nora," snapped Harge Kilgour immediately. "Dreamin'. The moon's got into yuh. If he was ridin' after 'em, he was only tryin' to haze 'em on out through the pass. Them hosses turned in spite o' him. Don't interfere with us, Nora. 'Twon't do no good. Yuh can't help him none by your—uh—your——"

"Lying," the girl supplied for Harge. "How dare you accuse me of that? I tell you I saw him follow and turn them. Risking his life to do it. That *Mañana* horse of his put on the greatest race I ever saw."

They were silent, but she could see that none of them believed her, not even Countess Berdoo.

"Nobody else said anything about seein' a handsome hero on a sorrel race-hoss turn the critters back into the mountains," sneered Harge.

Lin Button, too, shook his head stubbornly. The Texan would have staked his life that Nora was lying for the sake of the prisoner. Which probably she would have done, if it had been necessary.

"Maybe his hoss was runnin' away with him," chuckled Harge. "Same as many a soldier gits called a hero when his hoss grabs the bit an' runs towards the enemy. Things yuh see in the moonlight are deceivin'. Specially when you're lookin' at a handsome-lookin' gent that you saved from our guns back on the Rio."

In Harge, Nora realized, was a bulldog resolution to

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see Courtney hanged. To go against that determination was like butting one's head against a wall.

"It was agreed 'fore the drive started when we couldn't agree there was to be a vote," went on Harge. "You Falconers havin' three votes—you, Sandy, Lin. Us Kilgours likewise to have three votes—me, my old man, and our foreman. We'll count noses on this neck-stretchin' so there'll be no hard feelin's. If it's a tie vote, I'll agree to turn him loose," Harge concluded, with a triumphant look at Lin Button's set face. Sandy Neil might vote with Nora, but as for that little Texan whose life was wrapped in his four-legged charges, never.

"Not on a matter of a man's death, that vote don't go," said the girl quickly. "There was to be a vote only on the matter of routes."

"Which a-way you votin', Lin?" asked Harge, disregarding Nora's protest.

The Texan glared at the prisoner. "Hang him!" he spat out.

"One vote from your outfit for hangin' is enough to decide it," Harge pointed out. "Don't matter how you or Sandy votes, Nora. We can't afford to turn him loose; we got to warn his *compañeros* to keep off us. Damn 'em, either they're thieves or they don't want us to git to the San Telmo country. We got to make an example of this cuss, besides which we're dead certain he's the man that tried to kill your dad. What's got into yuh, Nora? Don't yuh savvy our property and our lives is at stake here? Why does this stranger mean so much to yuh?"

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"And why does his death mean so much to you ?" she countered. "You tried to kill him up on the Rio, without giving him a trial."

For some reason Harge's anger rose at her question, his already red face turning a darker shade, although he kept silent. Nora was learning about Harge Kilgour on this drive, new things ; she found she had really known very little about Harge before. Good ranchers, the Kilgours had been building themselves up from a small outfit, although there were people who claimed by the aid of long ropes, but she had never had a real line on their characters before this trail trip.

"Well, make up yore minds," said Sandy Neil impatiently. "Why not toss up a coin ? If it falls heads, stick his neck in a loop. Tails ; set him afoot. Gosh, we can't keep this hull camp awake just argurin' whether a man's neck oughta be stretched or not."

"Certainly not," chimed in the Countess Berdoo ironically. "Fancy losing sleep over such a trifle. I have it. Why not condemn him to a punishment even more terrible than hanging ?"

"Whut's that ?" Sandy asked unsuspectingly.

"It would be hardly humane," shuddered the Countess. "The punishment I'd suggest is to have Don Quixote Sandy Neil here sing that drouth country farewell ballad to him for an hour straight."

Harge Kilgour shrugged his broad shoulders. "No use fussin' about it," he said, appearing to give in. "Le's hold him t'night an' decide tomorrer what to do with him."

"I'll agree to that if he's kept under guard here in this

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camp," said the girl, suspecting treachery at Harge's sudden surrender.

"Sure," returned Harge. "In this camp. Pick your man to watch him, but keep him tied up, for he's slick."

Harge shot one last malevolent look at the prisoner, and then with his father and Lin Button prepared to ride back to the horse camp.

Courtney was given a blanket and, with his wrists and ankles loosely bound, he was permitted to stretch out. A small fire was to be maintained near him, and Bill Leaf, stoveup horse wrangler for the Falconers, was selected for guard duty.

Nora went back to the tent where she and the Countess slept, a big sheet of heavy canvas supported on one side by the top of a rear wagon wheel. Here the Countess slept on her cot, declaring her bones were too old to adapt themselves to the ground. Nora, using a cow-boy bed, drew off her clothes slowly, slid between the blankets and pulled up her tarp.

Outside a man was waiting, a prisoner, to have his fate decided in the morning. She'd have to see Lin Button, win him to her side so that if the Kilgours insisted on a vote, there would be a tie. She knew Sandy would vote her way. But meanwhile Harge Kilgour had given in too easily to be sincere.

Restless, uneasy, she got up and slipped on breeches, thrust her feet in *guarachas*, Mexican sandals, and went out. Young Mickey, who was a *vaquero* that asked no such soft things of life as tents, was sleeping near their wagons under his tarp. She awoke him.

"The rest of the night," she told him, "I want you to

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stay awake and watch Bill Leaf and the prisoner. If anything happens, you come wake me. Tomorrow you can ride in one of the wagons and sleep."

Mickey nodded, his eyes brightening. This was a mission that appealed to his boyish love of adventure. While the camp slept, he would be acting as special guard. And he'd be awake every second, too.

Back again in her tent, Nora forced her eyes shut, to slip off finally into a sleep which however only skimmed the surface of slumber. Several times she started awake, each time obsessed with the horror of a nightmarish dream—of a man, purple of face, being choked in a hemp circlet, while Harge Kilgour looked on gloatingly.

The last time she came out of sleep, it was not an involuntary awakening. Someone was tugging at her tarp. Mickey whispered to her from the other side of the tent wall.

"They came for him," he whispered. "Harge and Dake and Jared Roberts. Took him away. Horseback. Jumped Bill Leaf, gagged him. *Ley de fuga*—it is looks like they're goin' to deal him," the boy added.

Ley de fuga—law of flight, sometimes it seemed the one law that Mexico obeyed. A convenient term to cover the murder of a prisoner, shooting a man, claiming he had escaped. Both lawmen and guerilla revolutionists used it; anyone who had charge of a helpless prisoner was more liable than not to get rid of any enemy by claiming *Ley de fuga.*

"Get me a horse," she ordered Mickey. "Any horse." She was dressing before the boy had gone,

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flinging herself into clothes, any clothes, thrusting her feet into the *guarachas* and buckling on her cartridge-belt and filled holster.

Then she was sprinting out of the tent into darkness. Mickey held a mean, hammer-headed grey, Sandy's night horse.

"Only one I could find quick," he said. "Hold up his head," whispered Mickey as the girl "cheeked" the big brute's head over. Recklessly she kicked the grey in the ribs and thundered away. The horse did not pitch for a wonder. Falconer horses had a way of rising to emergencies, and maybe the grey recognized this as an extraordinary emergency.

As she rode there was a faint smell of dust in the air, left from the small party that had ridden away. They were heading straight down into the valley towards the horse camp, after having left the camp slowly so as to arouse no one.

Courtney, bound, helpless, in Harge Kilgour's hands wouldn't last long. They might hang him or they might take him just far enough from camp to be out of hearing range of a gun-shot. She had to save that man. If she didn't, the world would fade for her, all purpose in life disappear, the sun never look the same again. Her love for Courtney meant all of that to her, and more.

Across the bed of an old *playa* as smooth as a dance-floor, the hoofs of the big horse drummed under the lash of the quirt. Beyond, there was broken country with little canyons and knife-edge ridges.

As she topped the first of these ridges, she heard the

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explosion of a gun, as nerve-shattering almost as if the bullet had crashed through her brain. She was too late. They had killed Cole Courtney ! A muffled cry came from the very depths of her soul. She quirted the big grey mercilessly and raced on.

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CHAPTER IX

"NORA'S HOSSTHIEF"

OTHER shots smashed the quiet of the night with their angry thunder, billowing up from the nest of deep little ravines. Nora shouted as she flew along, but against the guns her voice seemed but a whisper. The number of shots held hope that Courtney might have escaped.

As she halted on the top of a ridge, one of the men below saw her and guessed the rider to have come from camp. Harge Kilgour's hoarse bellow came up. "Look out for that horsethief up there. He's afoot. The cussed eel slipped outa his ropes. Look out he don't git your horse. We shot the one he was ridin'. Don't be afraid o' him : he's got no gun."

Through the faint light she saw the riders beating the brush, circling. The girl's heart gave a leap. Resourceful as always, Courtney had managed to get away from them while they were taking him out to his death, dropping from his saddle into the mesquite. She felt like whooping jubilantly. Thief he might be, but above that towered the stark fact that the fugitive was Cole Courtney whom she loved.

There was a little rustling to the left and the sound of a boot against gravel. She held her breath. That might be Cole, fooling the men below, backtracking

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towards his enemies' camp to get a horse. It would be like that reckless hombre to take the risk, especially if there was a chance of getting back his sorrel pet, *Mañana.*

Harge's group, scattering to continue their hunt, rode in widening circles, hoping for a glimpse of the prisoner. They didn't realize that the rider above was friendly to Cole. And with that in mind, why not send them off on a false scent, asked Nora.

As the three dipped out of sight in a little draw, her gun came out to send out five roaring shots. Through a muffling handkerchief she shouted in hoarse man fashion and raced down a big ravine leading out to the plain. As the grey plunged on, she took out the rifle in her scabbard and emptied that. The ruse worked. Harge, Dake and the man with them pounded over the ridge and down the ravine along which the girl was riding.

Ahead of them, where a bend hid her, the girl swung her mount sharply, to ride him up the slope to the ridge top and over it. A moment later the pursuing riders swept past, just across the ridge from her, in a mad race for the flat, rifles crashing wildly at every shape that might possibly be a man.

Deliberately then and at a jog-trot Nora rode back to where she had first shot. She was guessing Courtney had identified her when she had started that fake alarm. He had, for as she came out on a little point free of brush, Courtney came towards her. Below, the tumult raised by the trio of riders was growing fainter. The fugitive had gone unscathed through the hail of bullets.

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They had been leading his horse, he explained, with his hands tied to the horn, carelessly in their haste to get out of camp before their raid was discovered. Working free of the ropes, Cole had seized the first chance to jump off into the brush. And as Nora guessed, he had been heading back to the camp to pick up a horse. A man afoot in this desert country was in a poor way.

"The Kilgours seem to want you killed for some reason," Nora observed.

"Evidently," Cole said drily. "I don't know why. There's a lot of things I don't savvy about this, Nora, but the Kilgours will bear watching. You'll believe me when I tell you that? But I guess you won't trust anything that I say. The only thing to do is to thank you for taking those three away from me—unless you want to take me back to camp."

"Of course not," said Nora. "But how can you get away?"

"Got a pair of legs that have never failed me yet," remarked Cole.

"You'll take this horse," she told him. "He's not as fast as your *Mañana*, but he's a good horse, the kind that you tried to steal tonight. I don't know why I'm fool enough to do this," she said in sharp self-reproach. "Any more than why you turned against your friends in heading that stampede."

"Maybe you're sorry for me and feel you owe me something for helping you a couple of times," Cole suggested. "But I know why I turned traitor, Nora," he went on gently. "For you. Not that it can ever

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lead anywhere. God knows the trails you and I ride are a long way apart and are liable to get still farther. We began wrong, and we'll never be able to make a fresh start. If we could, do you think you could care a little for me ?"

"Yes, Cole," she said frankly. "I could care for you. Not a little, but a lot. So much it would hurt. I've had to fight from caring for you, when I know I should hate you. And I do hate you," she went on resolutely. "I never want to see or hear of you again. I shan't forget you, Cole, ever, but you're an enemy. I've got to remember that. I doubt if you're a horsethief, but I believe you're fighting against us for your own selfish interests. Deliberately trying to ruin my father, which is even worse to me than just being a man who's trying to steal a bunch of horses. You talk about the danger of a revolution, but I think that's just a smoke-cloud to hide your real reasons for wanting to keep us out of Mexico. You men have got stock grazing on our land down there, and you don't want to lose the range."

"So that's why you think we're trying to keep you out of Mexico ?" he inquired sharply. "To save a little grass for our stock. You must have a high opinion of me, Miss Falconer."

"What else is there to think ? If this revolution is so dangerous to us, why shouldn't it be dangerous to you ? Why don't you and your neighbours move out before it breaks ?"

"That's easy to answer : we can't. Some of the men down there would be grabbed by sheriffs if they crossed

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the Border. We're not in the danger you are. I told you the revolutionists want your horses : we don't have many. But since you're determined not to believe me, we'll have to keep on being enemies, I reckon. Nora, some day we're going to start over. I'm not going to lose you. I never loved anyone but you, Nora ; never will. Just wait and keep a little doubt in your mind about my being a low-down skunk. And watch the Kilgours. They hook up in this trouble that's coming up below. Take care of *Mañana* for me, will you ; I'd hate to have a man like Harge Kilgour straddling him."

In spite of her convictions about Courtney, Nora found a doubt already in her mind. Always he had the ability when talking to her to make her believe in him. He might be right ; Mexico had been quiet for a few years, which was the best of reasons for supposing that the country was ripe for another revolution.

"Those revolutions can be pretty bad, can't they ?" she remarked.

"Plain hell," he answered bluntly. "I've seen a lot of killing down there as a boy ; saw haciendas pillaged, saw men shot down before adobe walls after they'd been made to dig their own graves, Americans and Mexicans both. After seeing that, I don't want to see it again."

"Why do you stay down there ?" she asked. "You're not an outlaw. You can come back to the United States."

"Yes. But what little I own is down there. I'm not running away and leaving it. And I like Mexico,

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too, as much as I swear at it. It's a country that makes you mad, the way things are run, but still I like it. And as for the Mexicans themselves, I like them. Some of them are the best friends I've got. For their sakes and the sake of the country, I'd do a lot to keep trouble from coming again. Always during those cussed revolutions everybody loses except a few of the crooked leaders. I'm an American and intend to live above the Border as soon as I can, but hang it, I like Mexico, too. Enough anyway to fight to keep a bandit gang from starting another revolution."

There were depths in Courtney she had only guessed at before. A strange mixture, a foreigner in *Mañana-land*, which had been a foster mother to him.

"Maybe some day I'll apologize for distrusting you," she said, moved in spite of herself.

"You need never do that," he said quickly. "I'm only hoping that some day you'll maybe see my side. I've never loved anyone before, Nora. I'll never love anyone else. There's one thing I'd like to ask. Does the name '*El Matador*' mean anything to you ?"

"No. I've heard of a lot of queer names Mexicans have called themselves, but not that one. Why ?"

"That '*El Matador*' is one of the leaders in this revolution that's boiling. A mysterious hombre that we haven't been able to find. But they're drumming up popularity for this bird among the peons ; same as they'd build up some scrub politician in the U.S. that they intended to run for office. I understand he is a real bullfighter, but part American. I've been wondering if there could be any tie between that bullfighter

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and the Kilgour family. The Kilgours are hooked up in this some way. That's why I figure they were so hot after me up on the Rio. I believe they had word from Mexico that I was coming up to try to persuade you people not to trail your horses down."

"There is something queer about that," said Nora. "There is a bullfighter among the Kilgours. Not in the American family. That's just Harge and his father, and Harge always would be too awkward to even dodge a freight train. But Dake Kilgour had another son, born in Mexico, a half-brother to Harge. I heard Dake brag once that he had a son who was a famous toreador; had even gone to Spain to fight in the bullrings there. I think the mother of that son died while the boy was a baby, and his mother's people in Mexico raised him. Dake never talked about his first wife.

"And speaking about toreadors and a man known as *El Matador*, here is something that might hook up with it. The morning before we left, we heard a trumpet call that Sandy Neil says was what he'd heard in Mexican bullrings, the signal for the *espada* to kill the bull. And we heard the same call given by the rider who guided us to the hidden lake."

Courtney's face expressed his amazement.

"Still," went on Nora, "he couldn't have been known to the Kilgours, for Harge raised his rifle to shoot him. Which might have been just put on by Harge," she added thoughtfully.

"Yeah, to keep away a suspicion later that there was a connection," said Courtney. "This *El Matador* uses a Spanish name, although that wouldn't prove he

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wasn't Kilgour's son. Raised by his Mexican relatives, he'd probably use their name. It does seem to sorta hang together. *El Matador* or one of his revolutionist party might be following you to see that your horses get to Mexico safe. But I forgot—you don't believe in a revolution."

One of the trio of riders was returning. Nora turned the grey over to Courtney.

"You'd better ride," she told him.

His hand touched hers as he took the leathers of the grey. The touch brought something leaping between them, like an electric spark. They looked at each other, her red lips a little open. A moment they stood, and Cole swayed a little nearer her, then suddenly caught her in his arms. At which the girl felt a wild desire to put her arms about him, to ask him to hold her tight, shutting out all but themselves. Reason triumphed over that impulse. He released her, stood looking at her hungrily, as if trying to fasten the picture of her in his memory.

"Some day," he said huskily, "things will clear between us. Good-bye, Nora."

"Good-bye," she returned dully. "And I'm hoping I never see you again, Cole."

She turned and strode off for camp, and when he was out of sight, she heard the sound of the grey, being ridden south by Courtney. She realized the bitter lesson that thinking something did not make it so. Reason told her that she should hate Courtney, that he was a scoundrel, who because he was in love with her, at times was moved to do things against his own

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interests. He was an open enemy in a band of men to keep the Falconer herds from reaching Mexico. It should be simple to hate him, and yet it wasn't.

Keyed up with the memory of the night's incidents, she hurried back to camp which, either not hearing or disregarding the shots, was still asleep.

The Countess Berdoo stirred as the girl entered the tent. "What was the shootin' about?" she inquired. "Can't we get a hour's sleep without some fool bammin' away with his smoke-pole? Why, honey, what is it?" For Nora was weeping suddenly, within the compass of the Countess' arms.

"Where's the candidate for a rope?" asked the Countess. "Did something happen to him? They didn't kill him, did they, honey?"

"No. He—he got away."

"Then what are you crying for? Because they didn't kill him? Mebbe-so it'd have been better if they had salivated him," continued the Countess in cow-boy vernacular. "That *caballero*, you saw him again?"

"Yes. Harge Kilgour was taking him away to kill him when he escaped. We had a talk and he—he—almost made me believe he was in the right. When I know he—he deserves to be hanged."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said the Countess tolerantly. "There's folks steals a heap of things more valuable than a few horses and don't get strung up for it. Give the lad credit. Back East, I knew a lot of horse-thieves, only the polecats worked in banks and sold me worthless bonds at par, the sons-a-guns. Look here, you forget this homely-lookin' *vaquero* from the pampas or

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mesas or wherever he's from. How you s'pose he's learned to talk Spanish so well? From a bunch of sweethearts——"

"I don't believe it," said Nora. "He—he said I was the only one he'd ever loved."

"And he dragged that old wheeze out and hog-tied it for you?" scoffed the Countess. "But if that's the way you feel about him, that's the way you feel. So why weep? You'll see him again. And as a horse-thief, he might be the very man to drop a loop over. Once was a time when the he-man that could steal the most horses or the most girls, was the sort that made the hearts of weak women go pitty-pat."

"Cole's not a thief," protested the girl. "He just wanted to scatter the horses; keep them from reaching Mexico. But just the same, I hate him."

At which the Countess sniffed, and insulted at having her hates sniffed at, Nora went to her blankets. Sleep was impossible, and she was glad when a horse came into camp and Sandy Neil dismounted to rattle a coffee pot outside the tent, while his voice dealt in the sing-song verse about drouth-et countries. The Countess indignantly dressed, and with Nora went out to the fire where Sandy, in his jacket and toreador cap, hunkered close to a steaming coffee pot.

"I don't know why they call 'em cow-boys," said the Countess sourly. "'Coffee boys' would be nearer the truth. If they rounded up cows like they rounded up coffee, they'd all be top-hands."

"Nora's hossthief got away," remarked Sandy regretfully. "Took my grey hoss, dang him. He'd

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'a' made a handsome hangee, too. I don't know if I'll ever git a chance to see a handsomer hossthief hangin' by his neck, with his head——"

"Sandy, will you shut up?" said Nora, and then unaccountably she burst into tears.

"Whut now?" asked Sandy. "All I remarked was——"

"Sure, all you remarked was to describe how Cole Courtney would look if he were hanged," said the Countess. "It makes me feel like weeping, too."

"It only makes me feel like takin' another cup o' coffee," said Sandy, suiting the action to the word. "Nothin' like coffee to put new life into an old frame, or to heal busted an' achin' hearts. Specially coffee with a shot of tequila in it," he stated, producing a bottle of Sauza's V.S.O.P. from a chaps' pocket. "With the kind permission o' yuh ladies, I'll strengthen this here cup o' coffee o' mine."

"Now you're talkin', old hoss," said the Countess heartily, holding out an empty cup. "Let 'er trickle, Sandy. Keep pouring; can't you forget your Scotch ancestry for a minute? I think I'll make mine a cup of tequila with a shot of coffee. Here's mud in your eye, Sandy, and the hope you find the pair of breeches that belong to that monkey jacket."

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CHAPTER X

VISITORS TO SOLEDAD

THE old ranch of the Mirabel family below the Border, called the *Hacienda de la Soledad* because of its isolated position in a big valley, had been an old frontier outpost. Like so many of its kind its great house was a walled town, fort, ranch headquarters, all in one. It had stood off innumerable Apache attacks and had carried on deadly feuds with distant neighbours. Now it was sinking slowly into a ruin. Its range had been eaten up by debts, its owners driven out by revolutionists, and time was putting the finishing touches. Abandoned, the empty hulk of thick adobe walls was taken over by scorpions, centipedes, and bats.

Not that it had ever been entirely deserted. Homeless peons had drifted in to take possession of a few rooms, to farm a little of the surrounding soil, to eke out in various ways a poor living. Travellers, often outlaws, stopped there over night, stabling their horses in rooms containing broken bits of furniture that had been imported from France. *Hacienda Soledad* had once been famous for its hospitality, and it still played host to numerous people, although its guests were either the poorest of the poor or renegades who would drive a knife in a man's back for the few pesos in his pockets.

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Cole Courtney, travelling north from San Telmo, found it a lively place when he arrived one day nearly a week after the failure of the stampede. The population was at least a hundred people, travellers mainly who were stopping over for a night or two, all bound for a *fiesta* at San Telmo.

In the big courtyard about which lay the quarters of the former owners, a dozen little cook fires, fed on the wood of broken sideboards and canopied bedsteads, sent smoke towards the blue sky. There was the plink-plunk of guitars and the soft voices of singers. In the orchards, where the trees were dying for lack of irrigation, burros, mules, and horses were cropping grass. Gossip was traded by women who, as they cooked, smoked in corn-husk wrappers a tobacco called *Caballo negro* which would knock many an inveterate American smoker on his ear.

One crone had set up a small outdoor restaurant, deftly rolling *tortillas* paper thin on her bare brown arm. A man was selling drinks from a stock of low-grade tequila and wine. *Hacienda Soledad* was for the time being an inn. Everyone had their own blankets and picked their rooms from the available dozens, first making sure that no rattlesnakes were already chambered there.

Courtney, unsaddling his horse, bought a little barley from an old Mexican, fed his mount and afterwards staked him out in the orchard. Courtney was weary, dusty, after a fast ride from San Telmo. He had not rejoined his neighbours, the Knights, Kimberlys, Bill Horn, and the others, after Nora had given him the

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grey. Whether they knew or did not know of his treachery during the stampede, he was through with them temporarily. After this he was playing a lone hand, in a game that had as its goal the prevention of a Mexican revolution. A man-sized job, and one which he knew was all but hopeless.

Returning to the town of San Telmo, Courtney had found a veritable hot-bed of rebels. During the coming *fiesta* that was to last a week, it was judged the leaders of the revolution would strike their first blow, seizing both the fort and the small city. The Federal garrison in the town was disloyal; the commanding officer, Major Benito Ontra, was known to be one of the ring-leaders. In San Telmo, Courtney had heard more talk of the mysterious *El Matador*, who was being boomed as the leader of a revolt planned to sweep all of Northern Mexico, a man whose real name and whose origins were unknown, as well as his present whereabouts.

Failing to accomplish anything else, Cole had persuaded influential San Telmo citizens to send urgent letters by special messenger to Mexico City, asking the authorities to rush troops to San Telmo to quench the smouldering fires before they burst into flame. That was all he could do in the town, and he had ridden north again, with no well-defined purpose except to be near Nora Falconer if danger came to her.

No more threat was to be expected from his neighbours, he was certain. They had shot their bolt in the attempted stampede, and now that the horses had crossed into Mexico, there was nothing that they could do. If they suspected Courtney's treachery to them,

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they probably would be thinking hard things of Cole, but that couldn't be helped. Maybe he had been foolish in stopping at the last moment the dispersing of the big herd of horses, and maybe not ; only time could tell.

The trail drivers would be now he judged some miles north of the *Hacienda Soledad*, near which they would turn south-east to the future range of the Falconers.

Wandering along the willow-lined stream where women were washing clothes, pounding with paddles the cloth laid on flat rocks, as women had done for generations at this hacienda, he decided to take a bath. Finding a little isolated pool below the house and well hidden by willows, he dipped in the water, scrubbed himself, and was changing to clean clothing from his slicker roll, when he heard a voice just the other side of the willow screen. A woman's voice singing a Spanish song. There was not much modesty here ; if any of the women guests of the hacienda discovered him, they would laugh and retire, but Cole, having certain innate shynesses, quickly finished dressing.

The woman singer above him began splashing about in the pool, evidently also taking a bath. He smoked and waited for some clothing that he had laundered to dry, reflecting that the voice was a pleasing one, with something strangely familiar about it.

A trained voice he judged, as she sang a snatch of Carmen, which Cole recognized from phonograph records he had heard. And then as she left the opera and returned to an old familiar Mexican folk-song, he was sure that he had heard that voice before,

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singing that very song. Not once, but many times.

He began to puzzle over it. No one, as he remembered it, had ever sung that song in just that way, except a girl he had known on the big Mexican ranch where his father had been a partner. A girl with exceptional talent for singing and dancing, daughter of one of the foremen. She had been sent to Mexico City to a convent, but Dolores Mendez he had heard had not stayed long in the convent. Her sorrowful name, Dolores, certainly did not fit the gay dark-eyed sprite he had known.

When the splashing ceased, judging that it might now be proper to speak, he called the name she had always preferred to Dolores, "Conchita". There was a gasp, and then the green willow screen pushed aside, revealing a girl wrapped about in a single garment, dark-eyed, pretty, and undoubtedly Dolores, alias Conchita.

"*Azúcar!*" she exclaimed at sight of him. That had been her pet nickname for him; he had all but forgotten it. She was older than Courtney by a couple of years and had called him "Sugar" to tease him, telling him that he was sweet. Cole had been at a bashful age then, and the girl had shamelessly coquetted with him as far as the watchful eyes of her mother allowed. At the time he had thought himself wildly in love with the graceful little minx, as any boy of seventeen would have been.

Unabashed now by her scanty attire, her brown feet twinkled over the grass, and she put her arms about him and kissed him. Which was an entirely

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natural impulse for Conchita Mendez: this Cole Courtney was an old friend she was glad to see again.

Then she stepped back to survey him, exclaiming, "How you have grown up!" as if surprised that he had not stayed a boy. "You are bee-eg, handsome. A man."

Five years before Cole would have been embarrassed to tears by all that, but now he merely laughed and told Conchita that she had grown twice as beautiful.

The first excitement of the greeting over, Conchita Mendez retreated modestly to dress. Fully half an hour later she reappeared, a resplendent looking creature compared with the cheaply-clothed women of the ruined hacienda, in high-heeled slippers, sheer stockings, a dress with many spangles. All of them had been purchased, she proudly informed Cole, in Paris.

She sat down beside him on the grassy bank, tucked her legs demurely under her and smoked the cigarette he offered. They talked Spanish; it was Conchita's mother tongue, and Cole had learned it along with English.

"Once," she said sadly, "I have my own cigarettes, with my monogram on them. That was in France. I was a dancer there. At night clubs. And in Spain. It was in Spain I got homesick for Mexico." She rattled on about herself; she was the actress type that takes it for granted that others are as interested in her as she is in herself. "Spain was like North Mexico—hard, white. I came back. And besides, there was someone I loved in Spain who came to Mexico."

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The girl could tell unbelievable tales about herself. She had run away from the Mexico City convent to join a travelling troupe ; had gone to Paris where she had been an entertainer, displaying the "*Jarabe*" folk-dance of her native land. A rich Argentinian had fallen in love with her, had married her, but she had left him. She had been in Europe, South America, the United States. Already in her beauty were faint signs of the premature ageing that often comes in the early twenties to Spanish-Indian blood mixtures. She talked on about herself, while Courtney listened, amused, until finally dropping that engrossing subject, she turned to Cole.

"You are married, my handsome one ?" she asked in English. "With babees, yes ?"

"No babees," he said, laughing. "No married. No nothing."

"Ah, what a great sorrow," she said. "I have a babee, a boy, but his papa take him. He say I was not fit for to be mother." Her voice dropped. "But he is old. Bald. And his family"—her contemptuous gesture disposed of her bald-headed husband and his family.

"No wife," she repeated. "Then many sweethearts, yes ? Dozens, *n'est-ce pas* ?" she said, flinging in the French phrase with a gesture. "Sweethearts, I am sure. The girls they all look this way and that at you." And her big dark eyes, expressive as all those with Spanish blood are, sent playful messages.

"To be in love—it is life and it is death," she sighed. "I am in love with *el señor gran*. He is like you, *Azúcar*

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—American. Or half, anyway. He is a great man. The greatest toreador in the world."

Cole started a little. That honour had been claimed for the man being boomed for rebel leader, *El Matador*. He certainly wasn't the greatest in the world, but it was being claimed for him in Mexico.

"I met him in Madrid, where the jealous Spanish *espados* did not let him appear: he would show them up. He asked me to come to Mexico with him. He was in love with me very much. And now his head is full of——" Her voice dropped, and she looked about her as if in fear of eavesdroppers. "I can tell you, *Azúcar*. He thinks he will be great also in war. To be a leader of the people."

Cole was listening intently now, although he covered it by lighting another small brown cigarette.

"It will be soon," Conchita went on. "He will sweep all Mexico. He rides day and night, making secret talk with men. When the revolution starts, he will fight here, there, capturing this town and that, always getting more men to join him. It makes me sick. And we were so happy before they put this idea of being a great general into his head. He tells me that he must be doing big things, but I will not give him up. He makes speeches and tells men he will liberate them. He will be *El Matador*, the Liberator. A lot he care about the people. There is only one person he care about—himself—but sometimes," she added sadly, "for a little while he cared about me. He still does. I will not let him throw me, Conchita, aside!"

"You know where this *El Matador* is?" he asked.

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"I know where he will come," she went on. "He rode up into this country a few weeks ago to arrange for soldiers and guns and horses. Soon there will be war with *El Matador* riding at the head of thousands of men. But I should not tell this even to you, an old friend."

"It is all right to tell me," he said. "Horses and guns, eh? And you know where he will come and when?"

She nodded. "Yes. He is to be in San Telmo for the *fiesta*, and he will pass by this hacienda on his way. Soon! Maybe tomorrow, maybe the next day."

"This *El Matador*," he pursued, "what is his name?"

"Trias; Antonio Trias. He will free Mexico, and I ask only to be allowed to ride with him into danger, to take in my breast the bullets meant for him," Conchita finished impetuously.

Courtney considered. So *El Matador's* name was Antonio Trias, but that might be his mother's name. He still might be Dake Kilgour's son.

Conchita yawned suddenly, and once more switched back to Courtney. "Your father is dead, your mother she is dead?" She made a clucking sound of condolence. "For you to live alone is not good," she went on sagely. "You must have someone to care for you. I bet you have someone. Then you should marry her."

"That is easy to say. But she thinks I am a horse-thief, a *ladrone*. Not much chance for me."

"I am sorry," said Conchita with another yawn. Plainly others' troubles did not worry her much.

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It was near sundown. They went back to the hacienda, Cole to look after his horse, putting the animal in a broken corral where the old fellow from whom he had bought the barley would keep an eye on the mount. Then he returned to the big courtyard, just as a cavalcade rode through the dusk up to the ranch house. More than fifteen riders, heavily armed. They evidently intended to camp for the night at the hacienda, and as the leader rode into the courtyard, people hastily got out of his path. Checking his horse, he sat his fancifully-decorated, flat-horned saddle, looking about him.

Conchita appeared from nowhere and, giving a little cry, ran towards the man. "Antonio!" she cried. "*Mi Antonio!*"

Antonio. Antonio Trias, the name of *El Matador*!

Courtney stared. He was looking at the mysterious figure who was to lead a new Mexican revolt.

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CHAPTER XI

"CONCHITA NEEDS AFFECTION"

THE rider that Conchita addressed as "Antonio" had grey eyes, despite his Mexican blood, was well under six feet, and sat lithely erect in the saddle. He wore his long dark hair tied in a knot at the back of his head as toreadors do, but his clothes were those of a dashing *caballero* who might have a fondness for displaying gold braid and silver ornament. Perhaps thirty, with a thin face having the high cheek-bones of the Indian, he was a handsome man, but evidently spoiled, used to the adulation and hero-worship which Spanish and Mexicans accord the more famous of the class of toreador known as *espada*, or matador, those who deliver with the *estocada* the death thrust to the fighting bulls.

He had been smiling as he rode into the court-yard, but now as Conchita caught his arm to pull him down to her, he straightened suddenly in the saddle, shoved the girl back and spat an impolite epithet at her.

Conchita kept her feet after the violent shove, and bursting into tears, pleaded with the rider in her soft, liquid voice, in words too low to reach the ears of those who watched. To no effect. The new-comer raised his

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hand to check the flow of talk. "I have no time for you," he declared in Spanish. "I have more important affairs." After which he turned to order his men to find suitable rooms for their quarters for the night, and to prepare a meal.

At the repulse Conchita flushed as if she had been slapped, and then without a word she raised her head and walked proudly away. She had been tremendously hurt in being flouted thus publicly.

A bellow of laughter came from the riders, and the whole courtyard joined in. The men continued to laugh as they dismounted, throwing the bridle reins of their ponies on the flagstones of the patio, letting them stand saddled while they had a drink. The leader, with several companions, disappeared in a room whose occupants were unceremoniously kicked out.

There was no doubt in Courtney's mind but that this was the *El Matador* who was being groomed to lead the rebellion to start at San Telmo. He looked closely at the man's followers. A hard bunch, the kind that went into war from a lust for loot, killing, and all that went with large-scale banditry. He shook his head. Many more such men he knew were waiting to ride with *El Matador*. When they started in earnest, this corner of Mexico was due for a blood-bath.

The mounts of *El Matador* and his men were scrubs, he noted. The San Telmo country had been swept clear of good horses during the last revolution. In Mexico, where great distances had to be covered horse-back in short time, where raids by armed forces had to

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be made swiftly, a military leader with such animals was as good as afoot.

What a treasure the Falconer and Kilgour horses would be for this *El Matador*. Their number was sufficient to mount what in Mexico was counted a small army. With his soldiers on horses superior to anything the Federals could furnish, it meant an ability to attack, to make lightning raids, and dodge back into the mountains.

Cole ate at the cleanest of the purveyors of *tacos* and *frijoles*, and afterwards sat in the door-way of a room smoking. He had decided to sleep outdoors: the deserted hacienda was full of vermin.

El Matador and his men had taken over a series of rooms across the court. They had cooked their meal over little fires. Some of them also wore their hair long and knotted at the back of their heads. These he guessed were part of *El Matador's* troop, the *chulos*, *capeadors*, *banderilleros*, who make up a company of which the matador is the head.

As the people in the court chatted and burst into occasional singing, in a little clear space of the flagstones appeared a sudden diversion, Conchita in a Spanish dancer's costume, with a vivid shawl over bare shoulders. Two old Mexicans, evidently her servants, squatted near her, one with an accordion, one with a guitar. The courtyard became silent.

The girl began dancing. Conchita could dance undoubtedly, and she was master of those indispensable adjuncts to a Spanish dancer—her shawl and her castanets. The shawl seemed to flow about her, to

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envelop her slim, bare-armed body like the arms of a lover, and her castanets fairly talked, now murmuring drowsily, then springing to sudden life, carrying to a swifter beat the pulse of the watchers. An alluring, bewitching creature, Conchita Mendez, voluminous skirts whirling, heels of her red slippers stamping on the flat stones of the patio to the music of the two-man orchestra.

As she stopped, those who had before laughed at her burst into shouts and clapped their hands in a wild applause, demanding more.

El Matador had at the beginning of the dance appeared in the door-way of the room he occupied, had stood there watching. Now, with the cat-like walk of a man whose life and livelihood both depend on his grace and quickness of movement, he walked slowly towards the girl. His pale grey eyes were burning. Reaching Conchita who stared at him from inky-black eyes, he took her bare arm, smilingly murmured something.

Conchita's eyes suddenly flashed sparks. "You have no time for me ; you have more important affairs," the girl mocked the man. And with that, she laughed and, turning an alluring shoulder, deliberately stepped away from *El Matador.*

Then with the devilishness of some jealous women who care not what innocent victim they may involve in their quarrels, she came towards Courtney and sat beside him. Courtney was startled. In the moonlight, thinking of a certain red moon back on the Rio and Nora Falconer, he had hardly seen the girl dancing.

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And when he had noticed her, instead of dark eyes and dark hair, he had seen blue eyes and hair of a coppery tinge, spun to fine threads to make a soft, shining glory.

El Matador following his rebuff had continued to stand, glaring balefully after Conchita. She had had her revenge on him, and on his thin face two spots of colour appeared.

Then, muttering angrily, he followed the girl, stepping with his feline, soft-footed grace. Three of his men, knowing that two fighting men and a beautiful woman mean serious trouble, trailed their leader.

Courtney, moving no less easily than *El Matador*, got to his feet to face the man who came to a stop a few feet distant.

"This is my woman," said Matador in English, that had little trace of accent.

"I don't see your brand on her," returned Courtney drily.

El Matador's eyes took on a basilisk stare. His hand went down as if casually to the big gun on his hip, and as casually Courtney's hand followed suit. "*Americano*, be careful!" he sneered.

Cole grinned. "Don't you like the American blood in you, breed?" he returned. "Half of yours I understand comes from north of the line. As for your women, if you can't keep 'em, don't come yowling to me."

Courtney stepped a little forward, putting *El Matador* squarely between him and his men, and lowered his voice. "You may be an elegant success flapping a cape in the face of a bull that shuts his eyes as he charges,"

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he drawled. "But I'll place a bet you won't look elegant if you make a pass at me."

"You talk unwisely. I am not alone here."

"Yeah," admitted Courtney, "it all might be unwise —as you say. But you'd never know, Señor, if you started something. Because you'd be dead."

Now the half-breed with the erect stiffness of body and graceful movement may have been a brave man; a bullfighter must have undoubted nerve, at least, to meet bulls. What he saw in Cole Courtney, however, was something far more deadly than the sharpest horns ever met in a bullring. What he saw in the eyes of the American was certain death. It was enough to make *El Matador* pause.

"As a matter of fact, you may have her," said *El Matador*. "I tired of her and cast her off. I have other concerns and other women. One that I am expecting soon will make this dancer look like a hag. One from your country, Señor. And now let me give you some good advice," he concluded in Spanish, raising his voice sharply. "Do not cross my path again."

He turned to rejoin his men. Their talk, except for the last sentences, had been in English. Those last words would uphold his prestige with the courtyard of people.

"Just a minute," said Courtney, and *El Matador* swung about. "Those concerns of yours," Cole went on, "you might be a little careful just what they are. See that they don't boomerang on you."

"What you mean?" snarled *El Matador*.

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"There's one thing about this country," said Courtney, "that sticks out like a sore thumb—the number of 'dobe walls. Ever notice 'em ? One of the best uses they're put to down here is having men stood up before 'em to be shot. Look out you don't end there yourself."

El Matador was furious, but not quite angry enough to make a hostile move. He had a sudden idea that this stranger was trying to push him into a fight, with the plain, simple purpose of killing *El Matador*. The Mexican made one savage decision : that he would have this insolent American rider killed before morning. Now he contented himself with a "You might take that advice yourself" flung over his shoulder, and strode away.

As for Courtney, he sat down again, and the noisy chattering of the court, halted by the dancing and altercation between the two men, started up again. Courtney was disappointed ; he had as *El Matador* suspected wanted the breed to go for a gun. He would, he was certain, be sure to kill *El Matador* and have an even chance to make a getaway afterwards. Killing *El Matador* might stop this revolution cold, or at least delay it.

A soft arm stole about his neck as Conchita slid down beside him. The dancer had withdrawn discreetly into her room during the argument. "You will forgive Conchita ?" she pleaded. "She was bad. She did not intend to make trouble between you and *El Matador*. I only wanted to give him back the slap in the face he gave me."

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Cole reflected cynically that the road to hell was paved with good intentions.

"I loved him better than life," purred Conchita, weeping a little. "But now I find it is you I love, *Azúcar*. I love you better than life."

"This *is* a discovery," muttered Cole. "Since when did you notice this change? Sorta sudden, no?"

"Since when I saw you stand here defying *El Matador*. You are not afraid of him. Nor of his men. Instead he was afraid of you. He is coward—like me. Always I have been a coward, *Azúcar*. That is why I need protection. I am afraid of bullets."

"I guess that goes for all of us," admitted Courtney. "Conchita, you're a good dancer, a fine singer, but I'm afraid you're liable to embarrass me. Can't you run away and find somebody else that you could love better than life?"

Instead of going she only laughed, while her arm remained about his shoulders. "Conchita, she is lonely," she murmured. "Conchita needs affection."

"You give a lot of time to thinking about Conchita, don't you?" Courtney remarked. "What you need is a good spanking." But he let her sit there. She meant nothing to him, and what did it matter if she stayed? Nora had him down as an enemy, had said she hoped she'd never see him again. He'd have to be stirring himself, getting out of this place. Sassing *El Matador* was one thing; being stuck with a knife while he slept was another. He'd get his horse and slide down the stream a-ways, and the next day he'd trail *El Matador* and his party.

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A party of three riders arrived, all Americans, spurring their snorting horses into the patio. Identifying two of the men among the trio as Dake and Harge Kilgour, Courtney shoved back a little in the shadow. The Kilgours had been anxious to have him killed ever since he had come to the Rio. The tall, raw-boned Harge looked Cole's way an instant, and Courtney's hand fell to his gun, just in case the rancher did recognize him. Harge's glance passed on.

One of *El Matador's* men came to the party, and immediately Antonio Trias came out to shake hands with the Kilgours. Cole remembered what Nora Falconer had told him about Dake's son, raised in Mexico among his mother's people, and who, according to Dake, had become a bullfighter. This visit strengthened the possibility to *El Matador's* being that son.

The three men turned to go into *El Matador's* quarters. That talk between the Kilgours and *El Matador* ought to make interesting and valuable listening. Cole looked into the room behind him. There was a window that led into a jungle of weeds from which he could make his way to the back of *El Matador's* room.

Before he could move, he became aware of a little stir among the shadows near the entrance to the court. Two new arrivals, dim figures in the night, were standing there, peering in at the patio. Two boys, one very small, the other almost grown he judged. He could not see their faces, but for a moment Cole had a queer notion that one of the boys looking across, seeing him

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sitting in intimate closeness to Conchita, was none other than Nora Falconer.

Of course, that wasn't possible, but Courtney was suddenly swearing silently. He could have taken Conchita Mendez and carried her down to drop her with a plop in the little stream below. He half started to get up, to speak, but the figures disappeared, slipping back out of sight.

Courtney grunted. He was seeing things. Of course that hadn't been Nora. What would she be doing here just at this time, although she might have come with the Kilgours. Lucky it hadn't been Nora or he'd have a lot to explain, sitting here with Conchita, after telling Nora a few short days ago that he loved her, that she was the only girl he had ever loved. He chuckled grimly.

Yessiree, lucky for him that the lurking figure in the shadows hadn't been Nora.

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CHAPTER XII

FLIGHT AND A QUARREL

As he got up, Conchita turned her dark eyes reproachfully on him. "I'm like *El Matador*," he told her. "Got important business to look after, even more important than talking about Conchita."

He slipped back into the room, crawled through the sashless window frame and was in a rank growth of brush and tall weeds. Through these he worked his way, heading for the back of the rooms occupied by *El Matador's* party. The wall of a small weed-grown garden barred his way, and immediately beyond it were the lighted spaces of the broken windows. From one of the rooms came the harsh voice that belonged to Harge Kilgour.

A bat sailed past and a man near the windows swore startledly in Spanish. The rooms were being watched at the back against listeners. Not so good. The roof offered a better chance of listening unseen. All the rooms had fire-places with separate chimneys.

A few seconds later he had swung himself up by means of one of the projecting *vigas* or rafter poles that upheld the flat, dirt roofs, acting as homely but efficient cover for the hacienda walls.

On the dirt roofs had sprung up a thick knee-high

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growth of weeds and wild grain, sowed by the wind. Through this Cole hurriedly made his way to the chimney which stuck up from the roof where *El Matador* and the Kilgours were conferring.

Looking down the short chimney, he saw only a faint light thrown into the fire-place by a lantern, the evening not being cold enough for a fire. In the act of bringing one ear down to catch the talk, he became aware of a rustling in the tall weed growth behind him. At once he whirled, drawing his six-shooter.

On the roof a few feet away, a small figure ducked down into the weeds, and in lieu of pressing the trigger, Courtney gave one leap to fall bodily on the intruder.

A muffled yelp came from below him and then a whispered voice in protest. "Hey, Mister Courtney, you've roped the wrong steer. I'm Mickey, from the Falconer outfit."

Astonished, Cole let the boy up. "You mean you—— Say," he muttered, a sudden suspicion striking him, "is your boss here, too—Miss Falconer? If so, this is no place for her. The little fool, she——"

"Thank you," came a low murmur out of the bunch of weeds behind him, and Cole swung to face the girl. "Will your remarks about me keep until later?" Nora queried pleasantly. "I think we'd better do some listening in."

Together the two bent over the chimney. Below there was only a murmur of angry voices, and then as the speakers helpfully moved nearer the fire-place, the words suddenly came clear.

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"I tell you not to worry about the money," Cole heard *El Matador's* clipped speech with its trace of an accent. "You'll get it all right."

"Yeah, get it," snarled Harge. "Likely get a 'dobe wall an' a firing-squad."

"You are the second man who has mentioned adobe walls tonight," said *El Matador* suavely. "Have no worry."

"You promised us part o' the money soon's we reached Mexico," came in the less distinct tones of old Dake Kilgour. "Half when we crossed the line. Where in hell is it? We've put all we got into this, and we want to hear the clink o' a few pesos."

"You will get the money in a few days," said *El Matador.* "At the *fiesta* at San Telmo there will be plenty of money for the taking. And the mines near there will give us a lot more."

"You're slippery, Tony," said Harge. "Don't throw down on us. I don't trust the Mex blood in you. We're doin' what we promised—deliverin' the horses and the guns and cartridges. Now fork over some *dinero.*"

"Certainly you have done what you promised." admitted *El Matador.* "And very good horses, too. But if not for me, you would have no horses to deliver."

"You were the hombre that led us to that water?" guessed Harge. He laughed. "I came in an ace o' droppin' yuh outa the saddle. You're a damn' slick cuss, Tony. Too slick for your own good. Why didn't yuh ride up?"

"I prefer to have a little mystery about me. You

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heard the bugle. You should have guessed it was the signal of *El Matador.*"

"You got us down here now, and we're in for it," said Harge Kilgour. "But you let us down and we'll fix you, half-brother or no half-brother."

El Matador laughed sibilantly. "I must ask you not to bring up the relationship. They would not like it if they knew I had gringo blood instead of Spanish."

Their voices rose angrily again and there was a shuffle of feet. And now the voices retreated as the owners changed positions again, and strain their ears as they might, neither Nora nor Cole could make anything out of the talk.

They moved away from the chimney and began talking to each other, while Mickey kept watch near the two-foot-high extension of the wall that enclosed the roofs.

"How did you happen to come here ?" asked Cole.

"You told me to watch the Kilgours. They got a message today, brought in by a Mexican. Right after that they said we would have to turn our route to take the horses by San Telmo for inspection by a government veterinary."

"Take the horses by San Telmo ?" repeated Cole. "The worst thing you could do. That veterinary inspection is only an excuse."

"I guessed as much," she stated. "And took Mickey and followed the Kilgours when they left camp. They said they were going ahead to scout for grass. Thought they acted as if they were lying."

Nora's voice was not cordial. She had discovered

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something that justified all the warnings Courtney had been giving her, but she wasn't in the mood to make apologies. Quite the contrary.

"That girl," she remarked coldly, "was very pretty."

"What girl?" Cole asked, confused. "Oh—uh—her. I knew her when I was a boy. She—uh—lived on the hacienda where my father was partner. I haven't seen her for a long time."

"It wasn't hard to renew acquaintance again, was it?" Nora asked. He could not guess that Nora was angry; that there could be jealousy entering into this. He only knew he was thoroughly miserable. The smooth live arm of the dancer over his shoulder, her sitting close to him, as if she belonged there—he knew how it must have looked. That darned Conchita, he would drown her.

"It seems," Nora went on, "that the Kilgours are mixed in some scheme to bring in guns and horses, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you're right about their taking our horses. And just because you were partly right, don't think I'm taking your advice or even listening to it after this," she finished acidly.

"Suit yourself," he returned, trying to appear indifferent. "But look here, Nora, this *El Matador*, he said something tonight about a girl coming down that would suit him better than Conchita. An American girl. He might be—he must have been talking about you. If he saw your horses, he's seen you. Make me one promise, Nora; that you at least will ride back north across the Border. Let your men take on the horses. After the *fiesta* at San Telmo, this Matador

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said they would have plenty of money. They must plan for it to start then. If it does, good night. The town will be full of people—ranchers, farmers, *vaqueros*, miners. Anything can happen and will. For the last time, I'm telling you to go home."

"And for the last time, I'm thanking you, and—not going home. Mexico is my home now."

Cole didn't know it, but Nora Falconer at that moment wasn't quite reasonable. Behind the girl's sprightly good nature lay a terrific temper. She couldn't quite explain why she felt the anger which stirred her now. She laid it to the fact that she had been played for a sucker by the Kilgours. Seeing Cole Courtney providing amiable support for a pretty Mexican girl, she told herself, had nothing to do with her wish to do violence to someone, almost anyone. But the idea of being betrayed by her father's old friends, that simply wasn't to be borne. Impulsively she stepped to the parapet and swung a leg over it, intending to descend by way of a *viga* into the court.

In alarm, Cole hurried after her, caught her arm. "You little fool," he muttered, "what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to drop in there and tell Dake and Harge Kilgour, and that half-breed relation of theirs, what I think of them all," she stated.

"I believe you would do just that," said Courtney. "It's lucky someone with a little sense is here to put hobbles on you. You're riding back to your camp, and be quick about it. What good will it do to talk to them? You can see they're counting on grabbing your horses."

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"I don't care," she returned stubbornly. "Those horses don't turn back. There's good range down there waiting for us, and I'm taking them up to it. It's better to run risks here than take them back north to starve. And I am going down right now to have it out with Harge and Dake."

Anger flooded Cole. His hands came out to grip her shoulders hard, to pull her back from the edge of the roof.

"No, you're not. You're going back to camp. I don't give a whoop what you do with your horses when you get there. But you're getting out of this hole—now."

And before she could protest, he had lifted her and was carrying her back over the roof of the house. Mickey preceded them.

Perhaps it was sight of the two figures on the roof, one carrying the other, which caught the eyes of one of *El Matador's* men. Or perhaps those detailed by *El Matador* to keep an eye on the brash stranger who had defied him had discovered that the place beside Conchita was empty and had started a hunt.

A yell was raised just as Courtney scrambled down from the roof, and on the heels of the shout, a rifle sent a screaming bullet that passed perilously close to Courtney's white sombrero.

Men came scrambling out of the rooms and into the court while *El Matador* began barking orders. More guns crashed. Even Nora Falconer was willing to admit the urgent need of flight. People who spied on the revolutionist, *El Matador*, were playing a

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dangerous game ; they must expect the same penalty given spies in a war—summary death.

Beyond the house, Courtney set Nora down behind the temporary safety of a high wall. "Where are your horses ?" he demanded.

Mickey, who had fleetly vanished when they had been discovered, now appeared dragging his and Nora's mounts after him. Cole swung Nora to her saddle and got up behind Mickey, to head towards the corrals.

In back of them the tumult was swelling—hoarse yells, shots, the jingle of spurs of men running for horses, all mingled. There could not have been more excitement in the old days when the big ranch was called on to stand off an Apache attack.

In the darkness the pursuit had lost sight temporarily of the fugitives, and some scuttling figures turned them off the scent. The old Mexican who was watching Courtney's mount, guessing that the guns might concern Courtney, was already saddling Cole's horse.

"All right," Nora said rebelliously from her saddle. "I'll ride, but this is going to be the last time you'll interfere in my affairs again, Mister Courtney." Which she knew was not fair, since he had only interfered before to help her and the doctor across the Rio, and a second time when he had turned the stampede.

"Suits me," snapped back Courtney. "Let's ride. Head north through the orchard."

As they tore through the trees, they were seen again, drawing the fire of the rifles. Neck and neck

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their mounts leaped an old weed-grown acequia, and neck and neck they swept up the gentle slope leading to a low mesa. Across this, they would head into some foothills beyond which lay the Falconer-Kilgour camp.

After they had gone a quarter of a mile, there came the clump of pursuing hoofs. *El Matador's* men were in their saddles.

Mounted as were the three on the best of the Falconer remuda, Courtney figured that they would have little difficulty in outrunning the scrub ponies of *El Matador's* riders. He had forgotten the Kilgours and the man with them, who also straddled Falconer horses. The Kilgour three spurred unmercifully in pursuit, leaving *El Matador's* riders behind. It was a grim chase for the miles across the mesa. The Kilgours knew they were playing with fire in dealing with rebels: it was to their interest as much as to *El Matador's* to stop the people who had been spying on them.

As their guns opened up, Courtney fell back and, slipping his rifle from its scabbard, turned in his saddle to throw back a few shots. The light was good enough to show the scattered pursuit, a group of horsemen far behind, and three much nearer, coming on fast. Courtney's shots made the lead three slacken pace, although the distance was too great for accurate shooting.

Riding on, Cole, who knew the country better than Nora and Mickey, took the lead and, leaving the mesa, they pounded into the mouth of a canyon which dragged a snake-like passage among little slag heaps

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of foothills, skirting the barrier of a huge cloud-piercing sierra. Up the canyon their horses raced, clattering over rocky stretches, crashing through clumps of chaparral and past desert growths of yucca and mesquite and prickly pear. And steadily on their heels hung the pursuit.

The fugitives had to save their horses to cover the gruelling miles to camp, while the Kilgours could afford to kill theirs in the race, figuring that if they failed to run down the quarry, they would so exhaust the mounts of the three fleeing people that the slower party of *El Matador* could close in. Riding desperately through the brush and up the steep slopes, the Kilgours pushed nearer, and their shots began coming close.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE DAUGHTER OF BRAND FALCONER

EMERGING from the foothills, they saw a slope barren of cover slanting ahead to the plain. Courtney realized the Kilgours had to be stopped. Past the crown of a little ridge they had just climbed, he dismounted to tie his horse.

"Fog it," he told Nora and Mickey as they also pulled up their panting horses. "I'll be along later."

Instead of going on, Nora flung herself from the saddle. "All our horses need breathing," she pointed out. "And no one is asking you to be my guardian!" Joining Courtney, she knelt coolly behind a rock providing a rest for her rifle barrel. Courtney grunted; he could think of another candidate who needed to be dropped in a pool of water. Mickey squatted near them, proudly holding an ancient rifle that was more dangerous to him than to an enemy.

Here where they knelt was a little group of rough wooden crosses, with a little heap of stones under each cross. A party of travellers had been ambushed and killed here by Indians, and their friends in passing had stopped to say many an Ave Maria and Pater Noster, depositing with each prayer a stone.

The trio of advance riders came pounding up the

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slope, spurring their horses hard. The hammer of Courtney's gun clicked back, and Nora's and Mickey's followed suit.

"I'm not your guardian," admitted Courtney, replying belatedly to Nora's tart remark. "But you're a stranger down here. I know this country. One rifle is enough to turn 'em." His gun exploded, sending down a horse and abruptly halting the advance. The other two riders spurred into the brush, followed by the dismounted horseman.

"You could have killed a man instead of a horse, if you were a good enough shot," said Nora, still in her contrary mood.

"Yeah, but they don't hang people for killing horses. Besides I thought you might be marrying Harge Kilgour, and I'm sure that big hulk of a tramp I set afoot was Harge. I didn't want to make you a widow, sort of."

"I never intended to marry Harge," declared Nora. "I wouldn't marry him, any more than I'd marry you."

"Is that a promise?" inquired Courtney flipply. "Let's go. They're waiting for the rest of the army to come up." He found himself rather enjoying the quarrel with Nora, with whining bullets to give spice to the verbal fight.

They ran to their horses, mounted and galloped on. They got half a mile before the rifles started up again behind them. Two men now instead of three were pushing them. Ahead stretched a sea of scrub brush, and here they stopped again. But the two promptly

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circled, trying to cut in ahead, and on Cole's urgent order, the girl and Mickey loped ahead while Courtney stayed back to swap shots.

When he rejoined them, Mickey was riding on ahead, hunched over his saddle like a jockey in a race. The girl, slim, pretty, was holding back her horse waiting for Cole. When she queried anxiously if he had been hit, Cole made a sudden startling guess. The reason why Nora was so out of sorts was because she had seen him with Conchita. No, that couldn't be true. Nora didn't care that much. Still it might be best to explain that little incident.

"That—uh—woman you saw back there," he said. "As I told you before, I used to know her when I was a kid."

"I'm not interested," stated Nora coldly. "What difference can it possibly make to me whether you'd just met the person who had her arms around your neck or whether she dates back to your cradle days?"

"They weren't around my neck," he snapped. "just sorta over my shoulder." Nora laughed tauntingly just as the guns broke out behind them like a swarm of angry hornets keeping persistently after them. They hardly noticed the shots. Cole was thinking glumly that she didn't realize that down in Mexico things were free and easy. A man's arm thrown carelessly around a woman didn't mean anything serious. But you couldn't try to tell Nora Falconer that.

Cole was near to swearing at Conchita. She and her blasted *El Matador* that she had loved better

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than life. Dragging her fool desire for revenge between him and Nora Falconer. Nora whose face held the lovely mystery for him of the night itself, representing everything to him that was beautiful, desirable. And as plumb unattainable as the North Pole.

He dropped back again to play his dangerous lone-handed game, and the guns crashed in a small battle for so long that Nora turned her horse to ride to help him. She had covered half the distance when the steady clump-clump of a single horse sounded. As Courtney came out of the brush, it seemed to Nora that he swayed a little in the saddle, and when he pulled up he was holding to his saddle-horn with one hand. He had lost his hat, and she could see a dark stain on a temple just below the line of hair.

"They shot you!" she gasped. "Oh, Cole! They got you."

He put up a hand to his head. "That?" he said dazedly. "I hurt myself lots of times more by falling out o' my cradle. I think they've quit the chase. I downed a couple horses and a man or two. They turned off down the valley. Just keep pounding on. I want to trail that outfit."

"We're riding on, Mickey and I, but you're riding with us," said Nora firmly. "Cole, get down and let me have a look at your head. It's still bleeding. You're coming along with us, hear me?"

"Don't like your bunch: afraid they might have a rope there waiting for me," he said with a feeble attempt at a joke. "I'm all right, Nora—be careful. This country—I'm afraid——"

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And then he slumped forward in the saddle, would have fallen, if Nora had not caught him. She was crying a little as she eased him to the ground. Mickey had a canteen on his saddle, and she bathed Cole's head as well as she could, bandaged it, weeping a little more because there was so little that she could do. When she poured a little water down his throat, it brought Courtney back to a mumbling consciousness.

"Nora," he said, and smiled as he saw her close to him. "Nora, I love you. That other girl—she——"

"Of course, foolish," she said softly. "I was just jealous, Cole, that any other woman should even touch you. I love you, too, Cole, and now there's nothing I can do for you," she wailed suddenly.

"I'll be all right," muttered Cole. "Just like being kicked in the head by a horse. I've lamed many a bronc by sticking my head in the way of a hoof."

He tried to climb back in the saddle, but it took the combined help of Nora and Mickey to place him there. Once in leather, he managed to keep his seat, and they started off slowly with Nora's arm ready to give needed support.

The girl's heart was beating with a painful heaviness. His skull might have been fractured; those bullets that seemed only to glance along a man's head were often serious enough to result in death. And he had been struck while fighting for her safety, when she had been snapping at him like an ugly shrew. She pillowed his head against her shoulder for a moment, murmuring soothingly, their tired horses walking shoulder to shoulder.

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The chase evidently had been given up as hopeless: there was no sign of further pursuit. Courtney occasionally broke out in mumbling talk as they rode. It was a weary distance for the wounded man, with broken country to cross, stony ramparts of hills, and brushy draws. Courtney, becoming a little delirious with fever, sang snatches of Mexican songs, love songs, a lot of them, but then, Nora thought, most of the Mexican songs were love songs. Most of the songs in any language, for that matter. She was past jealousy. What difference did it make if he had loved or now loved some girl of this country? He had been hurt trying to help her. Ever since they had met he had been trying to help her, and she had misjudged him, had been ungrateful.

As they neared their camp, a rider came towards them, rifle held in his hands. Nora gave a glad cry as she identified the slight, short form of Lin Button, who was scouting about, on guard against any riders who might venture near his charges. He grunted sourly as he recognized the wounded rider. In Lin's eyes Cole still deserved hanging. Surlily he went with them to camp where Sandy Neil and the Countess Berdoo still sat by a tiny blaze, drinking coffee and yarning. Neither of the Kilgours had yet returned.

"Well, well, so you brought him back again," said the Countess. "Showed good judgment, I think."

The big, bear-like Sandy slid Courtney from his saddle and laid him on a blanket by the fire. The Countess poured out a basin of hot water, and Nora carefully sponged away the blood from the matted

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hair. The bleeding had stopped, but Cole was feverish. There seemed to be no permanent injury, but only time or a doctor could determine for certain.

They put him on the cot in the women's tent and returned to the fire where Nora, aided by Mickey, recounted all they had learned at the *Hacienda Soledad.*

"Allus suspected the Kilgours had something funny in them extry wagons," said Sandy Neil. "They never let nobody go pokin' in the cargo to find out. And so they been in cahoots with a bunch of cussed rebels to steal your horses. If any gents need a rope, it's that pair."

"I can't be sure they intended to steal our horses," said Nora.

"Couldn't of intended nothin' else," stated Sandy. "Wantin' us to trail past San Telmo. It looks like a sure-enough revolution. I'd join up if it meant a chance to meet that bull-annoyer who beat me outa the pair o' toreador pants I won from him in poker. My nose is gittin' baked plumb down to the roots wearin' this blame monkey cap, but I taken me a vow to wear whut I got o' this outfit until I gits them braided knee-pants."

"I wouldn't miss this *pasear* for anything," remarked the Countess. "It gets better and better. A genuine revolution. *Libertad y tierra!* Land and liberty. Battles and raids. Smoking haciendas. I think I'll join some leader and become one of these *soldadera* ladies who go trapesing through campaigns with their men, washing their shirts, cooking their *frijoles,* and

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seeing that they get up every morning to show up for their daily eight-hour shift of fighting."

"If anything was needed extry to make war a hell, it would be takin' the wimmen along," remarked Sandy. "That custom alone is enough to show whut dumb-bells these greasers are. Whut does a man go to war for? Why, to git away from the fighting in his home to some war where he's got mebbe-so a chance to win. That's a sure way to end wars—make all the soldiers take along the wimmen."

As they talked on, a solitary horseman rode into camp, Dake Kilgour, on one of the ponies from *El Matador's* mounts. Dake, a grizzled old wolf whose best days had long passed, had no inkling that two of the spies they had chased sat before him in the persons of Nora and Mickey.

"Where's Harge?" asked Sandy.

"He went on south to look over the range," said Dake. "My horse got lame and I had to trade with a Mex."

"Sure of that?" demanded Sandy sternly. "You ain't been sneakin' off to meet up with a rebel gang?"

"Who says so?" blurted Dake. "It's a lie."

"I overheard you and Harge and the man you called Tony talking back at that ranch," said Nora. "You've got guns in those wagons; you've brought down horses for the revolution, and you intended to put ours in, too. You've been playing a deep game, Dake, with my father out of the way. And about Dad, from what I learned, you likely had as much to do with

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shooting him as anyone else. To get rid of him, so you could grab off our horses."

Dake stared, stepped back as Sandy advanced on him.

"Dake," growled Sandy, "you're a double-crossin' old polecat. If I thought you'd had Brand Falconer shot, I'd kill you here and now."

Dake gave a grunt and his hand went down to his gun, but Sandy, moving fast for all his size, came in to wrench the six-shooter from the rancher. After they had tied him up, Sandy had to threaten to stuff Dake's mouth full of dirt to stop his cursing.

"That's that," said Sandy, dusting his hands. "Whut we doin' now, boss?"

It was left to Nora to decide. Cole's advice to go back would have been sensible if they had something other than desert and starvation to go back to.

"We're driving south for the hacienda," she said without hesitation. "The revolution hasn't started yet. Maybe it won't start. And maybe if it does we can keep those robbers from getting our horses. And we're leaving right now. Our wagons and cattle can come later."

"That's a-talkin' like the daughter of Brand Falconer," said Sandy approvingly. "No time to cut out Kilgour horses; we'll jist head the whole bunch south-west. I'll rouse the boys for a non-stop drive to *Hacienda Encantada*."

All the men except the few needed to keep the cattle loose-herded were to go with the horses. The cook hustled them a meal, and when that was finished, they

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roped horses from a bunch held in a wagon and rope corral, and saddled.

Nora went in to look at Cole, now sleeping peacefully on the Countess' cot with its air mattress. The Countess was to remain to look after the wounded man. Nora bent over him, wanting to kiss him, but afraid that even the lightest touch of her lips might waken him. She was, for all the uncertainty, the gloomy outlook, happier than she had ever been in her life. She no longer had any doubts of the sleeping man. Cole Courtney was a man any woman could be proud to love, prouder still to be loved by him. And he belonged to her. She'd scratch out the eyes of that Mexican girl if she ever came near Cole again.

They had journeyed perhaps a mile when a clump of hoofs sounded behind them. Fearing that perhaps Dake Kilgour had got loose and was bringing his riders to stop them, Sandy, Lin, and Nora fell back. Instead of Dake it was the Countess with her patient, Courtney.

"*Valgame Dios!* as the Mexicans say," remarked the Countess, "what a man this hombre is. As soon as he heard the rumble of hoofs, he came to life and jumped up r'arin' for action just like one of these faithful old war-chargers smelling gun-smoke. Nora, don't blame me. It would of taken the Devil and fourteen bulldogs to hold him in that cot. I guess he's going to live after all—probably to be hung."

Courtney grinned a little. "Heading for *Encantada*, are you?" he asked. "That's what I was hoping you'd do, young lady."

"Then why did you advise me to return north?"

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Courtney's grin became wider. "Maybe it was because I'm learning how to handle you," he told her. "All I've got to do is to advise just the opposite to what I think best."

He leaned over to put an arm around her. "Whatever you want to do is all right with me, honey. Always will be. You folks better raise a lot o' dust. That half-breed Tony-Kilgour-Trias bullfighter will be likely heading for San Telmo to make trouble for you. That's where I'm heading likewise. I've got a few friends there. You may get to the hacienda without trouble. If you do, scatter those horses out in the mountains south. One of Dake's men left after he saw your drive start. Likely to go to San Telmo to report. They'll probably try to stop you. If it's the regular government authorities who tell you to go to San Telmo, go with them. No use to try to fight them, even though we know they're in the crowd starting a revolt. We'll find ways later to lick them. It's *adios*, Nora."

Their lips met in a brief kiss, all the sweeter for the promise its brief intensity held. Then Cole was spurring off to the side, headed for San Telmo.

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CHAPTER XIV

EL MATADOR, LIBERATOR

SINCE the start of this disastrous journey to Mexico, there had been constant worry—the threat of the desert, the menace of enemies. Now that they had reached Mexico, a greater danger loomed before them. There seemed to be a jinx on the Falconers. Their trip at the end might work only for the benefit of an ambitious revolutionist.

Nora knew one thing: if *El Matador* rode up with his chocolate escort and tried to stop them, there would happen what always happened every time a bunch of Mexicans had mixed with Americans. A lot of work for the undertakers, called in Mexico *buarros*—buzzards.

At dawn they halted for a short rest, then pushing on all day, camped that night by a water-hole out in a malpais desert. They had turned far to the east of San Telmo, and there was no sign of any party riding to stop them. But they put guards out grimly, preparing to move on again after midnight.

The next day they went on under a long column of dust that hung lazily in the sky. Since the start they had covered an unbelievable distance. Those Morgans with the Arabian strain could travel. The Kilgour purchases of ordinary stock were bringing up the drags.

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At the noonday stop for lunch, a small cloud of dust drifted towards them from the direction of San Telmo. Glasses showed a troop of uniformed men, forty or more led by a tall, gangling officer, wearing glasses. On one side of him was Harge Kilgour, and on the other side was none other than *El Matador* himself. For a moment Nora feared that the revolution had already started, but *El Matador* was still in *charro* costume, not an officer's uniform. And plainly when hostilities started, *El Matador* was going to adopt the gaudiest, richest uniform he could have made for him.

Nora remembered Cole's advice: to offer no resistance to legal authorities. And she was taking that wise young man's advice after this. Lin Button, Sandy Neil, and the rest were planning battle, heading the horses into the hills, while the men fell back to fight.

"Hold on," she said. "Those are regular troops. We can't fight them; they're the government that we're going to live under."

"But all of 'em," growled Sandy, "are going to join this *El Matador* that you say is riding with 'em now. 'Long with that cussed Harge."

"We can't start a fight," insisted Nora. "They're government troops."

"Why can't we start a fight?" demanded Sandy. "They'd be nothin' but a pack of greasers, no matter if they was carryin' harps and wearin' wings."

" 'A primrose by the river's brim, a yellow primrose was to him'," quoted the Countess Berdoo.

"We're in Mexico," said Nora, "and we've got to

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obey the Mexican laws. Courtney said to do what they told us. And he knows."

The men were stubborn, but the girl was the boss, and by the time the forty men pounded up, Sandy and Lin had been persuaded to peace.

The bespectacled, gangling officer came up, introduced himself as Major Benito Ontra, in command of the garrison at San Telmo. It would be necessary he stated to bring the horses to San Telmo for inspection by a veterinary, as they had told Señor Kilgour. "Perhaps," the Major suggested to the girl, "you have only gotten off the route by accident, no? We will ride with you to show you the right trail."

She could make a plea, but she saw it would be useless. This officer, Major Ontra, was plainly in with *El Matador*; neither argument nor bribery would do any good.

Harge and *El Matador*, who had held back during the interview, now pushed up. Harge was red-faced with anger.

"Lot of good it did yuh," he growled at Nora. "Look here, I'm in charge of everything from now on, savvy? This is Mexico, and yuh better stick with me."

"You're in charge of the wagons with those guns, too," Nora returned. "That's a serious offence, Harge—gun-running. If they proved it on you in the U.S., it would be prison. If they caught you down here, it would mean being shot."

Harge glowered at her, but *El Matador*, looking at the girl, only smiled and showed his even white teeth. At the look in his grey eyes, Nora turned a little sick. She

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read cruelty there and complete indifference to the pain that might come to others. If this breed ever came into power, he would stop at nothing. They had put themselves in a trap in coming to this alien land.

"Even if she knows of the guns," said *El Matador*, "it is no matter. We will trust her, as she must trust us."

"Yeah, Nora," said Harge who was scared by the responsibility for the gun-running. "We're all in the same boat. We can get big money for our horses."

Calmly *El Matador* placed himself by Nora's side as they rode along, chatting amiably while Major Ontra's soldiers, taking charge of the horse herd, pointed it for San Telmo. Sandy, Lin, and the other riders trailed in a disconsolate group.

They went on that day for a few miles farther and camped at a deserted ranch much like the one where Nora and Cole had listened in on *El Matador* and Harge. The horses were held in a peaceful little *vega* where in grass that grew stirrup-high, hen quail shrilly called together their broods for the night. Nora thought of the drought-stricken country from which she had come, and the wealth of Mexico so great and unused. Better to bring their fine horses here, where they had a chance at good grass and water, even if there was the risk that in a few days they would be ridden by the cruel masters who would be *El Matador's* ragged army, with the certain fate of being shot or dying from exhaustion. That revolution hadn't started yet, and there was the comforting thought of Cole Courtney.

Here at the ranch were also travellers for the *fiesta*

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at San Telmo, as well as a vagabond lot who were merely taking advantage of free shelter. In the big courtyard the women were pounding the *tortillas* on stone *metates* for the evening meal.

El Matador helped Nora dismount. "You would have missed much by not going to San Telmo," he stated. "That will be a *fiesta* long to be remembered. With a bullfight. You do not like bullfights? You will change your mind. It is the king of all sports. I ought to know. I am a toreador, an *espada.*"

"Or what is called a matador," said Nora. "And one of the meanings of 'matador' in Spanish is also 'killer', I believe."

Beyond that shot, Nora was accepting the situation calmly. She realized they were prisoners here, although their guns had not been taken. Major Ontra was satisfied that the gringos would not start anything against Federal soldiers.

Nora, the Countess, Sandy, Lin, and the whole Falconer outfit ate supper in one corner of the *patio.* Major Ontra, Harge, and Matador had established headquarters in another corner. Here they unrolled and bent over maps, murmuring in low tones, no doubt discussing the campaign to be made when hostilities started.

Later they summoned Nora. The Countess and Sandy started to go with her, but she sent them back and went on alone. Harge Kilgour and the man she was certain was his half-brother, Antonio Trias or Antonio Kilgour, *El Matador,* were in the room. *El Matador* met her smilingly. "You must not think

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of me as an enemy," he purred. "You have me to thank for bringing your horses to water when they were all but dead with thirst. We will pay you in gold for them. We need them badly, and we are willing to pay a high price."

"When ?" asked Nora practically.

"After we have struck our blow," said *El Matador*. "*Libertad y tierra*—land and liberty. That is to be the motto of our revolution."

"As it has been of every Mexican revolution," she scoffed. "Why don't you men admit you are in it for what you can get out of it ?"

"Well," admitted *El Matador*, laughing, "maybe you are right. You are smart, Nora Falconer, besides being resolute and fearless. Yes, I am in the revolution for what I can get. And that is not only money." His eyes went over her slim figure approvingly. "You have fine horses," he stated. "Just what we need. I appreciate your bringing them down to us. And do not worry about payment. You will get two and three times their value. I guarantee that personally. I, who will be master of all North Mexico. Money will flow in to us from contributors in the towns we capture. All Mexico will be aflame after the news of our capture of San Telmo is announced. And then campaigns, fighting, and a march into Mexico City, with me, *El Matador*, at the head of my victorious army."

Nora could see that this man wasn't just talking : he really believed that it was his destiny to march some day into Mexico City. And while he'd never get to Mexico City, he might last a long time as a

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bandit revolutionist, looting, hiding, fighting in a corner of Mexico for years. He would claim to be a patriot, but in reality he would be nothing but a pillager ; he had no intention of giving land and liberty to the poor ; instead he would destroy all that he could not steal. He would raid towns, levying tribute from merchants and taxing the people to pay his expenses.

Plain enough to see what they had got into, but even had it been given her to decide again whether to come to Mexico or not, she would still have come. "Falconers do not turn back"—that had been a humorous saying in Nora's family, but it was nevertheless true when they were put to the test.

"A wonderful girl, Harge, my brother," purred *El Matador*. "I saw her from a distance while I followed you from Mesa Grande. I do not know which I like better of what you have brought down to me—the horses or Miss Falconer."

Harge Kilgour glared hard at *El Matador*. "I didn't bring her down for you. I got prior claims on her, my fine rooster! What do you think I am—blind? I was raised on the ranch next to her and had her staked out long ago."

El Matador spread his palms. "My dear brother," he said, "one does not stake out a claim on so beautiful a woman merely by seeing her first—not in Mexico. Here a woman is not a piece of land. Even marriage does not make a claim that cannot be broken. And I declare your claim to be no good—disallowed." *El Matador* laughed.

Kilgour's raw-boned face grew red. "You cussed

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greaser," he said, and went for his gun. But the toreador was swifter; his muscles moved in perfect co-ordination. The same swiftness and sureness that had made him a famous figure in the bullring permitted him now to drag his gun before the bigger, clumsier half-brother could snatch the weapon from his holster, Harge blinked into the hole of *El Matador's* gun.

"Don't force me to forget we're slightly related and to kill you, Harge," *El Matador* sneered. Nora was staring in horror; holding the gun, the half-breed was half of a mind to kill the hulking Harge. And seeing that, she knew that this half-Mexican, half-American was utterly relentless, and she had a momentary fear of what he could do to her.

"This is Mexico," went on *El Matador* sternly. "A life is worth less than nothing, my brother. You brought us horses and guns: good. And a beautiful girl. You will be paid for all of them—if you are good."

The big Harge Kilgour was silent. He, like Nora, realized all too well as he stared at the gun that he was in a trap. He saw that he and his father had trusted in a treacherous relative to whom they meant less than nothing.

"You will all have to be good," remarked *El Matador* lightly, waving the gun to include Nora. "We are in this together; both of you know what I mean. If the revolution fails, your lives are worth no more than mine. We will all be traitors together. If you play along with me, it will mean wealth, power: whatever I get we will share. But don't get the idea that I am holding you by force," he told the girl.

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"You are quite free. You must not picture me as the Mexican villain who kidnaps pretty girls and eats them alive."

She looked at him silently. There was nothing to say. Nothing to do. It was as the man declared: until they could break free of *El Matador*, their fortunes were wrapped with his and Major Ontra's. Failure of the uprising meant for her the loss of the horses, and death for herself, for Sandy, all their riders, at the hands of Federal soldiers. Not that the success of *El Matador* offered any more: the promises of this vain fop, who because he had dodged bulls in the ring thought that he could become a great military leader, to pay for their horses were worthless. For the present they could only acquiesce in his plans, play along with this fool and his grandiose schemes. A *mediotonto*, he should be called, "a half-wit", but the lives and property of the handful of Americans down in the San Telmo country were at stake.

El Matador slipped his gun in his holster and then suddenly whipped it out again, to point it straight at Harge.

"Brother," *El Matador* addressed him, "you are with us, are you not—for *Libertad y tierra*?" He laughed as he brought back the hammer of the weapon. Perhaps he only wanted to put on a show for the girl, demonstrate his power of life and death over Harge—and over her.

Harge stuttered, but he declared earnestly he was also for *Libertad y tierra*.

"Good," said *Matador*. "Now please to let us alone. Shut the door behind you."

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Harge's face was a study. He looked at Nora, started to speak, and then abjectly left.

El Matador holstered his weapon, well pleased with himself. "What a rabbit," he stated. "Surely, you never loved him." Looking at Nora, at her pretty face and the blue eyes that were like the blue distilled in small flowers found only above timberline, he took a step forward. "He would not even fight for you," he stated, speaking of Harge. "Do not be afraid of me."

"I am not," said Nora, trying to speak quietly. "Why should I be ?"

"Why, indeed ?" he returned. "You can see that I mean you no harm. You and I—we will be partners, eh ? Some day maybe I will offer you half of Mexico."

He took her hand and laughed as she jerked it away. "You are right to be not afraid. *El Matador* does not take women : he waits for them to come to him," he said modestly. "When you know me better, you will learn to love me. I am to appear in the bullring at San Telmo, as a toreador. That is something to see, *El Matador*, the bullfighter," he went on. "But afterwards you will see something even greater : *El Matador*, the Liberator."

As she went back to rejoin Sandy and the rest, Nora could have laughed at the man's vanity, but she knew, for all the bombast, those ambitions were dangerous. Behind him were men with brains, the gangling, bespectacled Major Ontra and many others, using *El Matador* for their own ends, letting him run the peril of leadership. A combination that might go far among ignorant people.

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CHAPTER XV

NIGHT RAID

On the next day they saw San Telmo, its brown, flat-roofed houses having from a distance the appearance of a clump of enormous bake ovens. Above the low roofs reared the towers of a few churches.

It was evening before they reached it, after leaving the horse herd in a pasture below the town under guard of fifteen soldiers. Major Ontra and *El Matador* seemed indifferent to any warning the Falconer party might give in San Telmo of the planned revolution. Mainly for the very good reason that they counted the town already as good as theirs. Major Ontra, his officers and the soldiers of the garrison were committed to the rebellion. Many citizens were likewise in the conspiracy; the others would follow like sheep, once a decisive blow was struck.

Because of the *fiesta* San Telmo was swarming with people—peons, miners from near-by mining-camps, black-robed priests, Indians from distant mountains, rich *hacendados*, some of whom had come in lumbering coaches drawn by four or six mules. Besides these *ricos* there were the employees of the big ranches, small farmers, *vaqueros*, and *charros*, the latter wearing the old Mexican costumes of black steeple-crowned

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sombreros ornamented with bands of silver cord, blue jackets with rows of silver buttons and fancifully braided. Pantaloons of velveteen, very loose and open from knee to ankle, ornamented with filigree buttons; crimson silk sashes.

Major Ontra and his soldiers clattered off to the fort on the hill at the edge of the town, while *El Matador* conducted Nora's party to a huge, rambling hotel. Around the patio into which they rode were stables, coach-houses, and servants' quarters. A second court was centre for the rooms of the guests.

Mexican inns in towns the size of San Telmo are never very good; this hostelry with the name, *Hotel La Gran Sociedad*, was no exception. The rooms were none too clean; in the courtyard under the eyes—and noses—of the guests were tethered a couple of kids. Chickens roosted in homelike fashion in a clump of chinaberry trees.

The whole hotel evidently had been reserved by *El Matador*. He and his friends had taken the rooms on one whole side of the court, evidently for his military headquarters.

Nora and the Countess were assigned a room together, with a high bed overhung by a heavy wooden canopy.

"Child, I wish you weren't here," said the Countess.

"Nonsense," Nora said. "This may be a lot of fun. Or anyway, interesting." She wondered what Cole Courtney was doing. Plenty, she guessed. That energetic young fellow was not sitting twiddling his fingers. No hindrance was put on their movements, and with

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the Countess Berdoo after supper Nora wandered through the narrow, winding streets, past a great church which had been looted in a previous revolution of its fine silver and gold candlesticks and jewelled ornaments, past a Franciscan convent, by markets. The plaza was thronged with people, *ricos* from the *casas de campos*, country estates; *caballeros* in their embroidered jackets, curveting on their horses, sitting saddles many of which had pommels and cantles of solid silver.

Everywhere there were beggars murmuring entreaties for charity in the name of Jesus, son of Maria Purissima. There were miners and there were *arrieros* who conducted the long strings of pack-mules to and from the mines. There were a hundred little outdoor restaurants, women cooking in the *brazeros*, which also served to keep the *tortillas* and *chile colorado* hot. There were gamblers with monte games, tumblers, musicians, a hundred stands with gimcracks, and lighted by torches or flares. At one end of the plaza was a small merry-go-round, revolved by a puffing steam-engine and crowded with adults and children.

Troops of burros buried in loads of wood which they had carried to the city pushed among the throngs, the swarthy muleteers pounding them on and shouting for a passageway. In a narrow, dark street, where the women wandered, one of these outfits suddenly stopped by the two women. Nora shrank back from the *arriero*, but as he spoke English, she gave a great start. Under an ancient straw sombrero, cheap pantaloons, and a face stained very brown was Cole Courtney. Dressed *al*

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paisano, in the costume of the country, he could pass easily enough in the night for a Mexican.

They followed him and his burro down a still narrower and darker alley where the Countess pretended to examine with great interest the loads of wood sticks, which curved about the burros' ribs like huge horseshoes.

"What are you doing, Cole ?" Nora asked.

"Hauling wood, can't you see ?" he said lightly. "They have been looking for me, and I had to take on a little disguise. I made *El Matador* a little angry the other night." He had not told Nora about that : she might not understand about Conchita going to Cole after disdaining *El Matador's* overtures. "This thing has gone too far to stop here, I'm afraid. I see they brought your horses close to town. That couldn't be helped. Major Ontra is one of the ringleaders.

"It's due to erupt tomorrow," he went on. "After the bullfight. I've seen a dozen important men of this country who are all loyal. They say the garrison here is all for *El Matador* and Ontra. The telegraph office here is in charge of their men ; no messages about the rebellion can get out. There's a Mexican officer in charge of a small garrison across the mountains, a man called Colonel Corrado, although he's been demoted in rank recently. He's loyal, but his force is too small to do any good. We've sent word to him, but everyone agrees there's no chance to keep the town from falling to the rebels. What we aim to do is run off your horses tomorrow, when the fighting starts. Then there's the guns and ammunition wagons that the

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Kilgours brought down; they're being hurried into town. I've joined up with some of my neighbours, the same ones that helped to stampede your horses, to ride out and try to capture those wagons."

"If you need men, there's almost a dozen of ours at the hotel who'd help. Sandy, Lin, and the rest. All good men."

"I might call on 'em. I know the hotel where you're staying. It's a dangerous place for you, Nora, headquarters for the revolution. The wagons with the guns and ammunition are to be brought to the hotel, the arms being given out after the trouble starts to men *El Matador* can trust."

"How did you find that out?" asked Nora, surprised.

"Through a friend," said Cole a little hesitantly. "That girl you saw—Conchita. She's made friends with one of the garrison officers, *El Matador* having cast her off. She's valuable to us, you see, Nora."

Nora laughed. "I don't mind. I've been foolish, small, Cole, but I guess I'd be terribly jealous if I had reason. I've been struggling against loving you so long, now that I've given up struggling I want you all for myself."

"You darling," said Cole, and the Countess still intently examining the loads of wood, he stole a kiss. "We've got to win, although it's going to be plenty tough. The men behind *El Matador* are smart, but if we can only keep your horses away from them, we'll have those birds pretty well hobbled. And if we can capture those guns tonight we'll have 'em just

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about hamstrung. They're counting a lot on those arms. Nora, be careful tomorrow. This San Telmo is going to be a little corner of hell."

A fresh surge of noise came from the merrymaking crowds. Firecrackers were exploding, a few guns. Rockets whizzed up from the plaza.

"If we do get out of this, Cole——" began Nora.

"We got to," he interrupted, and held her tight. "And when we do, in a year or so I'm going to take you out of Mexico and go back home. This is good ranch country, but it's no place for Americans."

She did not tell him of *El Matador's* offer, the half-crazy, would-be conqueror's promise to share his glory with her. She was afraid those crazy dreams might become at least part reality; in Mexico unknown leaders had a way of rising to life and death sovereignty over large areas of territory. With the Falconer-Kilgour horses, *El Matador* would have an army of over twelve hundred mounted men, well-armed.

From the side of the loaded burros the Countess warningly murmured: "Psst! Time passes, my children. We better wander back, Nora, before you're caught in a suspicious flirtation with a lowly wood-chopper."

Cole released Nora and the two women went back to the *Hotel La Gran Sociedad.* Men were standing in a group outside *El Matador's* quarters, and more were inside the rooms. Cigarettes glowed in the darkness and men muttered to one another. There was all the atmosphere of intrigue so dear to the Latin heart.

Nora was in a dream, still feeling Cole's arms about

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her, lost in thinking of the happiness that might be theirs.

"I was once that way myself," sighed the Countess as she rolled a final cigarette before trusting herself to their bed. "No, four times, to be exact. Dang it, this romance of yours keeps reminding me of the four husbands I've had. I'm going to hire me some *caballero* to come around and stand under my window and sing songs. Can you imagine it—knowing there's to be a revolution tomorrow and nothing to do but wait for it? Whatever complaints can be made about the Mexicans, you can't say they're slow-moving when those hombres stir themselves."

The Countess Berdoo turned in and rolled about restlessly on the shuck mattress awhile before sinking to slumber. Nora, lying wakefully by her side, finally closed her eyes, only to pop them open again when outside there came a loud voice, Sandy's, entering the patio presumably with its owner. "And I got t' bed me down in a goat corral," the Falconer foreman roared a protest at the tethered goats in the courtyard. "Whee-ew! An' me a cow-man."

A shrill Spanish tongue lashed Sandy as a *borrachon*, a drunken one, and Sandy shut up. There was silence in the patio, and then in a few minutes a stealthy scratching on the door of the women's room.

Nora got up, slipped on her boots and breeches and went to the door. It was Sandy.

"Seen a wood-cutter down the street," said Sandy in a hoarse whisper. "He looked sorta familiar, like a hossthief I once knew. Said he needed some help.

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Me and Lin and some of the rest of us is ducking out to join him in playin' a April fool joke corralin' them Kilgour gun-wagons. We had to play drunk to fool the yap they had trailin' us. He thinks we're all in bed snorin'. I want to borry your rifle. We're shy on guns."

She returned to the room, slipped on her leather brush jacket, buckled on her cartridge-belt and six-shooter holster and joined him, carrying her rifle and six-shooter.

"All right, I'm ready," she declared.

"You ain't got no invite to this party," protested Sandy. "Go on back to your downy mattress."

"It happens to be stuffed with shucks," said the girl. "C'mon, Sandy, why argue with me? I thought I broke you of that habit long ago."

Sandy grumbled, but they stole out of the court-yard. In the headquarters across the court was still a buzz of talk as *El Matador* and Ontra and the other ring-leaders completed their plans.

Lin Button and six of the other Falconer riders joined them, and they all went down a long alley-like street, across a couple of yards and so arrived at the outskirts of the town. Here in a deep arroyo, horses and a group of men awaited the party. Courtney stepped out.

"Got a recruit," Sandy told Cole.

Courtney looked at Nora sternly.

"Sure, this is man's work and all that, I know," put in Nora quickly. "And a woman's place in war-times is the home—hiding under the bed. But I'll

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be in danger in San Telmo with a revolution on, more than riding with you probably. And I can outshoot nine out of ten men. *Vamanos.* What you got up your sleeve besides an arm, cow-boy?" she said flippantly.

Cole grinned—and gave up. "All right. It must be catching. In Mexico women go along with their soldiers. Welcome, *soldadera.* I'll let you go along with me this time."

There were sixteen Americans in the party. Those who had come with Sandy and Nora; the rest were Cole Courtney's grim-lipped neighbours who had consented to join him in the attack on the wagons. Besides the Americans were a dozen Mexicans, employees on the ranches of Cole and his American neighbours. These were in charge of a long string of pack-mules.

They rode out, heading across country in the moonlight. About ten miles from San Telmo, said Courtney, the Kilgour wagons, under escort of a few soldiers, would be camped. The guns and cartridges in the vehicles, discarded weapons of the American army, were enough to arm many hundreds of *El Matador's* men.

A point of light far across the plain became as they approached it the camp-fire of the teamsters and soldiers. Leaving the pack-mules and the muleteers a mile from camp, Courtney's party rode to within two hundred yards and dismounted to go on afoot. Two men, Cole and Lin Button, crawled up to fall on a lone sentry who sat against a wagon wheel. Sandy and old

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Bill Horn brought up the rest, in two parties that had nearly reached the encampment before one of the teamsters happened to see the advancing men and gave the alarm. The soldiers ran hastily towards their rifles and began shooting wildly, but Cole's party opened fire in return, crippling a couple of the guards before the rest surrendered.

Nora had been stationed down-trail to guard against the escape of any man who might carry the news of the capture to San Telmo. A Kilgour teamster, getting to a saddled horse, fled towards the town, while Courtney's bunch sent rifle shots that kicked up dust futilely after him. Nora called to him to halt, and when he failed to obey, shot the pony, sending the man tumbling head over heels.

When she took him back to the wagons she found Courtney's little party of riders already setting swiftly to work, unloading the vehicles. The pack-mules were brought up to be loaded with guns and cartridges. Enough rifles were to be sent on to the *Hacienda Encantada* to arm the Mexican employees of that ranch and its neighbours. The remainder of the contraband rifles and ammunition was to be destroyed. The wagons, however, were to go on to San Telmo with the boxes nailed up to lead casual observers to believe they still contained guns and cartridges.

"You see," Cole explained to Nora, "*El Matador's* outfit doesn't plan to use these guns until after they've taken the town, then they'll be issued to the men that joined the revolutionists. The wagons are to be pulled into your hotel. We're bribing the sergeant in charge

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here to say nothing about our attack. Our own Mexicans will take in the wagons as teamsters, leave them at the hotel, and skip. We're sending the Kilgour drivers and guard along with the pack-mules and guns to the *Encantada*; that way *El Matador* will get no warning that we've played a little joke on him."

"And when friend Matty finally opens the boxes?" asked Nora.

"He'll find sand," said Cole, laughing. "That's what we're scooping into them."

An hour later they started their ride back to San Telmo. The pack-mules loaded with Kilgour rifles and cartridges, the captive soldiers and teamsters had already started for *Encantada*. In the morning the wagons were to go on as if nothing had happened.

Courtney and Nora fell behind the jubilant little cavalcade, riding close together. Once when the others had dropped into an arroyo out of sight, their horses stopped. Nora's head came against Cole's shoulder, and as he held her tightly, her lips yielded to his.

"I ought to kidnap you or take you north out of this," he told her.

"It would be nice to be kidnapped by you, Cole," she murmured. "Maybe after this is all over I'll let you kidnap me. But you know you're needed here, Cole, and I'm staying too."

"And I like you to be here—with me, Nora. I'll want you always to be near me. I've wanted it ever since I saw you back at the Rio."

Nora nodded in the darkness. That was as it should

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be, that Cole should want her close to him. It was where she belonged—at his side—meeting whatever dangers might come. In his arms now, those dangers seemed ridiculously small. His kisses made the revolution that was to begin the next day seem remote, unimportant. Nothing could be important compared to being in the arms of the man you loved.

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CHAPTER XVI

EL REVOLUCION

A ROOSTER crowing in the courtyard of the *Hotel La Gran Sociedad* awakened them the next morning, and the Countess, unaware of the raid and Nora's part in it, sat up on the rustling shucks and began rolling a cigarette, an early morning habit she had acquired from Sandy.

A few minutes later Sandy knocked on the door and shoved in a pot of coffee he had made in the kitchen. The *fonda* began stirring. Likewise the town of San Telmo. Nora and the Countess Berdoo dressed and ate a man's breakfast of eggs, steak, and *tortillas* in the patio.

"Condemned people always eat hearty breakfasts," declared the Countess.

Cole Courtney and his neighbours had retired to their place of hiding in San Telmo. Until trouble actually started it was agreed that the Falconers were to remain quietly at the hotel, awaiting word from Cole.

El Matador, who had snatched a few hours' sleep in the midst of his hectic planning, was busy again during the morning, receiving the men who passed into and out of his rooms.

In the early morning there was a religious procession

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in honour of the town's patron saint, and afterwards, on a level field outside the city, there were horse races, *gallo* races, and various sports. The big event of the day however was to be the bullfight, and impatiently the San Telmoans awaited it. The San Telmo *plaza de los toros*, the bullring, was worthy of a much larger city. Bullfighting was a passion in San Telmo, and on this day of the *fiesta* the interest was high, for they were going to see the greatest bullfighter in the world, Antonio Trias, who it seemed was called *El Matador*. He was not one of the regular toreadors hired for the occasion, but was to fight as an added and special attraction, killing but one bull.

The lad, Mickey, who acted as messenger between Courtney in his hiding-place and the Falconers in the hotel, brought Nora a note from Cole about noon. The note he brought had nothing new; Courtney merely counselled patience and advised the Falconers to fall in with whatever *El Matador* had planned for them. According to latest advices the attack on the city was still set for dusk; the fort was to be seized first, and then the town itself.

When the fighting started, Courtney's small group and the Falconer riders were to join forces, sashaying out to take charge of the horse herd and to haze it with all possible speed towards *Hacienda Encantada*. In the wild confusion following the taking of the town by the rebels, Courtney hoped to get a long start with the horses. Reaching the hacienda, they would prepare to make a defence of the horses and ranch, hoping to hold out until Federal troops could arrive.

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Although the general population was as yet unaware of what was in the air, the *fiesta* visitors, stirred by wild rumours, were in a high pitch of excitement as the hour of the bullfight approached. Thus far knowledge of the rebellion was held only by its leaders, each of whom might control from twenty to fifty followers. These chiefs, the swaggering *hacendados* and *politicos*, were behind the whole trouble, hoping either to gain wealth or power, the latter the dearest thing to the heart of a Mexican. Stealthily they had been building the foundation for an uprising, dwelling on the alleged wrongs which the people suffered from its present government, and praising the merits of a mysterious hero who might be persuaded to lead the Mexican people out of their slavery. So well had they advertised by word of mouth his qualities that in the simple minds of most of the lower classes Antonio Trias, or *El Matador*, was already put on an equality with the national hero of Mexico, Benito Juarez, conqueror of Maximilian.

Occasionally when *El Matador*, leaving a smallish and swarthy lieutenant named Rodriquez in charge of headquarters, mounted a fine white horse to ride through the streets, everywhere he was greeted with loud bursts of enthusiasm and cries of *"Viva el Matador!"* Since Antonio Trias had never done any more than slaughter a few bulls, it was all childish in the extreme, but then most of the people of San Telmo were nothing but children.

El Matador paid a brief visit to the Falconers just before he left for the bullfight. The man positively

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glittered in the gorgeous braid of his toreador garb; his whole person radiated supreme self-confidence. After this day he would be known as the Liberator, *El Matador*. The Conqueror.

As he addressed Nora, *El Matador* was preening himself in his resplendent silk-lined cloak like a peacock, certain that he was making a tremendous impression on the American girl. "Tonight," he whispered for the exclusive benefit of one of Nora's ears, "there will be a new name in Mexico, a new star in the heavens. And you shall be there beside me sharing my glory."

"You do me too much honour," returned Nora, and *El Matador* was too full of conceit to note the mockery in the girl's voice.

"The bull I am to kill today I must dedicate to one of the influential citizens in San Telmo," he went on. "I would like to dedicate it to my beloved—you. In secret," he confided, "I will be doing you the great honour of dedicating it to you."

In mid-afternoon San Telmo and its visitors filled the streets, trudging in a dozen streams towards the bull-ring, although once arrived there, many, lacking coin for even the cheapest seats, could do nothing but stand outside, wistfully absorbing some of the thrill of the fight through the shouts of the actual spectators. *El Matador* had graciously arranged for places for the whole Falconer outfit, including Sandy, Lin Button, and all the riders who had been in charge of the horses. Nora had no wish to be witness to the slaughter of hapless animals, but she judged it wise to accept the invitation.

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When they arrived, the tiers of seats were already black with people. A band discoursed gay airs, competing with the raucous shouts of vendors of sweets, of *enchiladas, cerveza,* beer, instead of *pulque* being the popular drink in San Telmo. The crowd was at a fever heat. Occasionally some leather-lunged *pelado* shouted *"Viva El Matador"*, and the crowd would take up the cry.

"Why don't they bring on the bulls and get it over with?" asked the Countess impatiently. "I always hope the bull is going to win. Wouldn't it be a joke today if *El Matador's* bull ended the ruckus by running a horn between the ribs of that gay bird?"

Society in all its finery had turned out, bullfights being a recognized social function in Mexico. Señoritas and señoras were in their finest, many in low-cut sleeveless gowns as if at a ball. With their escorts in garb that showed the almost gaudy Mexican love of display, they made a colourful spectacle.

The dancer, Conchita, appeared on the arm of her new friend, the army officer, to be welcomed by admiring plaudits. With her sleek black hair topped by a great comb, a dress glittering with sequins, her bright shawl, the girl looked lovely, and if she was still piqued because *El Matador* had slighted her, there was no visible sign of it.

The band finished a gay air finally; there was a flourishing of trumpets, and in marched the toreadors to make their grand entrance, entering in order of their rank, the *espadas* first. A welcoming roar arose from the crowd. *El Matador* walked a little apart from the

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rest, considering himself far above the common herd of his profession. The roar turned to one great shout: "*Viva El Matador.*" The makers of the rebellion had worked well in their campaign to popularize their leader.

After the gold-braided cloaks of the toreadors were hung for display on the arena walls and the keys to the bull-pens were tossed down by the mayor, the arena was cleared and the first animal appeared. Charging like a thunderbolt into the ring, the bull leaped about with all the agility of a huge rabbit, rapidly charging first one *capeador*, then another, making them sprint to safety behind the barriers.

One man in particular, a toreador much beefier than the usual run, had a couple of narrow escapes, due in main to the fact that it was a tight squeeze for him to enter the narrow space between the safety barriers and the wall of the passageway which ran around the ring. It was this man who was to be the cause of a diversion which changed the spectacle temporarily from thrilling drama to comedy.

Sandy Neil had missed the grand entrance, having stepped out for a drink of something stronger than the beer offered by the vendors. He came back now with his toreador cap cocked over an ear, arousing the scornful laughter of those who noticed the gringo.

Sandy had no sooner settled himself on his return when he emitted a tremendous bellow and flung himself from his seat. Suddenly, before the astonished arena, appeared the sight of a fat Mexican toreador speeding across the ring pursued by a huge, red-headed

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American who was clothed from the waist up in the sash, jacket, and headgear of a bullfighter.

"Stop, yuh danged welshin' polecat!" roared Sandy. "Gimme them pants I won off yuh."

There were warning shouts and a thud of hoofs behind them. Señor Bull had caught sight of two of the hated tribe of men. The fat Mexican bullfighter scudded behind the barrier, where, followed by Sandy, he hastily leaped over the wall into the passageway that ran around the ring.

Pursued hotly by Sandy there, the fat one dived over the wall into the ring again, where the bull once more took up the chase, placing the poor *capeador* in the position of being up a tree with a bear descending towards him, while a bull elk waited for him on the ground.

Again with the bull breathing down their necks, the two escaped by a miracle, and once more the Mexican vaulted the barrier with Sandy close behind him.

Had this happened at an American sporting event the audience would have been roaring with laughter. The Mexicans were also roaring—but moved by a different mood—sheer rage. They had come to see something serious, an exhibition of a spectacle that they held in almost religious veneration, and now the personal grudge of a gringo was interfering. Imprecations were bellowed at the American; beer bottles hurtled down on the pair as they disappeared in the passage, and dozens of missiles were held awaiting their return. But this time Sandy emerged alone, and he was

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triumphantly waving what appeared to be a gold-braided black flag.

The Countess gave a joyous shout. "Whoopee! It's the other half to his suit! He just naturally shucked that bird of his pants."

Sandy, escorted by a dozen stern police, but triumphantly carrying the knee-length breeches whose gold-braid design matched his jacket, was ignominiously marched from the bullring. The fat *capeador*, pantless, disappeared in search of something to cover his legs.

The audience quieted as the bull turned at last on the horses with their armoured riders, the *picadores*. Knowing it would be the fate of the poor old horses to be disembowelled by the bull's sharp horns, Nora arose.

"I'm going to look after Sandy," she said. Lin Button left with her and the other Falconer riders. The audience hissed as they disappeared, Americans having suddenly become *persona non grata*. The Countess alone remained behind, announcing that she was going to see at least one bull killed: she cherished the sneaking hope that the bull might win. Some bull that would have sense enough to charge the toreador himself instead of the fluttering cape he held.

Nora hurried out just as a hullabaloo welled from the arena, cheers for the bull whose horns had just pierced the side of a poor horse. The police who had escorted Sandy from the ring, what was left of them, the others having hurried back to witness the fight, were outside one of the entrances. The two left in custody of Sandy seemed uncertain what to do with the prisoner. He claimed the pair of breeches were his,

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won in an honest game of poker, and there was doubt just what charge to place against the gringo. He had undoubtedly committed some heinous offence, but it was hard to put a name to it.

A happy settlement seemed to be the one suggested by the American señorita, the passage of a certain sum of money behind a convenient adobe wall, after which Sandy was left in possession of his trousers, and the police returned to witness the death of the first bull.

Glad of an excuse to get out of witnessing the torturing of cattle and horses, Nora and her party, joined by the Countess, returned to the hotel. There the little swarthy fellow, Rodriquez, who buzzed around like a busy fly and who was reported to be the brains behind the whole revolution, was receiving visitors in *El Matador's* quarters. This Rodriquez seemed to be content to let Matador occupy the spotlight, while he shifted scenery for the drama that was to start at dusk.

Shortly after, Mickey brought another note from Courtney. The plans of *El Matador*, of Major Ontra and Rodriquez were threatened by an unexpected circumstance. Several days before, Cole had sent word across the mountains to a small town occupied by Colonel Corrado and a handful of soldiers, the smallness of his command being the Colonel's punishment meted out by some minor official he had displeased at the capital. Colonel Corrado, a personal friend of Cole's, was both an able man and one fanatically loyal to the government.

Informed of the threatened uprising and the treachery of Major Ontra, the Colonel had done a brave thing.

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He had mounted his small troop of soldiers and had ridden post-haste to San Telmo. Arriving just before the beginning of the bullfight, Courtney and the Colonel had hastily conferred. What Colonel Corrado intended was to take over the town while all the soldiers of the San Telmo garrison were at the bullfight, and endeavour to arrest *El Matador*, Major Ontra, and the other ring-leaders.

This intention demonstrated the Colonel's high bravery, if not his good judgment, for the whole town was honeycombed with treachery. There was no chance to stop the revolt now : it was too far advanced.

Corrado admitted this when pointed out by Courtney, but the officer saw only his stern duty. There was also the argument that any resistance meant a delay in the rebellion, giving the Federal government that much more time to send in troops to put out the fire before it had swept over too wide a territory.

Soon after, at the *Hotel La Gran Sociedad*, appeared a squad of the Colonel's soldiers to arrest the swarthy Rodriquez. Promptly hostilities began, with a group of the men at the revolutionists' headquarters giving battle to rescue Rodriquez. Bullets flew about the court, and after two of Corrado's men were shot, the rest, outnumbered, retreated.

The attempt at the arrest of *El Matador* at the bull-ring by a sergeant from Colonel Corrado's command came at an unfortunate time so far as the psychology of San Telmo was concerned. The disturbance interfered with the bullfight, and the arrest, if consummated, would of course eliminate the added attraction, the

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appearance of Antonio Trias, king of matadors, in the ring. Corrado's little squad of soldiers and their sergeant were immediately surrounded by an angry crowd.

Major Ontra, hearing the tumult, left his seat to demand by whose orders the soldiers tried to arrest his friend, *El Matador*. When told by orders of Colonel Corrado and that the Major himself was also to be put under arrest, Ontra paled, and hastily summoned his men. Under a hail of shots the arresting squad were forced to retreat. Half a dozen of the crowd had been wounded in the shooting, and a near riot developed.

Both Ontra and *El Matador* saw the need of immediate action and left the ring. The revolution could not wait until evening ; it would have to be started at once. Colonel Corrado's arrival made a serious situation. Corrado had to be captured or killed, and his soldiers disarmed.

When the bullfight was delayed, the stands became a shouting, boiling mass of people. Shouts of "*Viva El Matador !*" arose, coupled with "Death to Corrado !"

As Ontra gathered his soldiers, word came that Corrado had stolen a march on them, had already seized the fort above the town and was fortifying the plaza. Post-haste Ontra marched his troops towards the fort, to be met at the plaza by shots from Corrado's soldiers. Various civilian leaders of the revolt collected what men they could gather from the crowd at the bullring to assist Ontra. Meanwhile back at the bullring the spectators who had paid their good admissions and

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had seen but two bulls slain were clamouring for the fights to go on.

Sporadic firing broke out over the town. At the plaza a hot battle rapidly developed between Corrado's troops and those led by Major Ontra. Outnumbered, Corrado's forces were slowly forced back along the streets leading to the fort.

El Revolucion had begun.

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CHAPTER XVII

TIERRA Y LIBERTAD

HALF a dozen small skirmishes had been started up in various parts of the town, most of them free-for-all affairs, centring about the bullring arena. *El Matador* was in the saddle of his white charger, and men were hastening to join him, bawling *"Viva El Matador!"* Others, crazed by the excitement of the bullring and the harsh clatter of the guns in the streets, were shouting it just to be shouting something.

In the hotel the Americans had seen the little ruckus in which the arrest of the civilian ringleader, Rodriquez, had failed. The whole party of rebels left at once, leaving the Americans in charge of the deserted hotel. Hastily they saddled their horses in the shed stables of the other courtyard and waited, listening to the sound of the gun-fire which was steadily increasing. Sandy Neil rode out for a scout. Nora was worried about Cole. He had promised to come to the hotel. Was he engaged in some of those small battles ?

He appeared suddenly, the swarthy dye of his face gone, riding into the courtyard with two of his neighbours who had been on the raid with him the night previous. All were carrying their rifles in their hands. Along the crooked streets of the town bullets were flying recklessly.

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"Your horses," Courtney announced, "are on the move, being headed for your ranch. As soon as Corrado started operations, we knew the fireworks would begin. We jumped the guards at the pasture and started the *caballos* off with a bunch of our riders. Nothing for us to do now I reckon but to follow. We offered our services to Corrado, but he told us to stay out of this; not to take sides. Said he'd hold up *El Matador* and Ontra while we hazed those horses on for the *Encantada*. Old Corrado's a scrapper; if he had a few more men he'd squash the rebellion here and now."

Nora and the Falconer riders swung on their horses as Sandy came dashing in, his big face spread in a wide grin. "*El Matador*," he said, "on that white pot-bellied pony of his is fit t' be tied he's so mad. Half the town started to foller him a while ago. '*Tierra y libertad!*' he was shouting. 'C'mon, *amigos*,' he told 'em. 'I'll furnish yuh with guns to help us get rid o' this tyrant, Corrado.' He'd got word those Kilgour wagons was just pullin' into town.

"Lot o' hombres whooped 'er up for Matty an' trailed him. And when they reached them gun-wagons and busted open them boxes, you should of seen *El Matador*. No guns. Jist sand. He frothed at the mouth. 'We been tricked!' he yelled. I guess he suspected the Kilgours put one over on him."

They rode out in a compact group into the street. There was no fighting in the immediate vicinity, but here as everywhere in the town there was a tremendous confusion. The bullfights had been abandoned as the

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battle on the plaza got into full swing. Men, women, and children were leaving the *plaza de los toros*, streaming along the streets in a wild flight for the safety of their homes. Without warning a rifle crashed at the head of the street through which Nora's party rode, and a man from the crowd of fleeing Mexicans went down. The flight became a panic.

Nora, to avoid riding down a group of women, turned to the side and, caught up by the swirling mob, was lost from her party. Courtney noticed her predicament and forced a way to her through the terror-stricken people. More bullets were whistling along the street. One hit a woman in the arm. Screeching, the crowd huddled against a wall, afraid to move.

Courtney dismounted to kick in the door of a house, which, opening to a walled court, afforded a haven for helpless San Telmoans. Rejoining Nora, Courtney, with the girl, raced after the rest of their party, who were out of sight. Jumping their horses over a low adobe wall and crossing half a dozen backyards they found themselves in another narrow street. The pair had been missed, and to the accompaniment of cow-boy yips the Falconer riders suddenly thundered up.

"If we ain't gittin' into this ruckus, le's git outa here," snorted Sandy. "If we kin find a way out."

The firing over town was getting heavier; at the plaza the gun-fire was continuous. Now there came a sudden surge of civilians along the street, ten or fifteen men who fired back as they retreated. Pursuing them were a group of Ontra's rebel soldiers. As the civilians melted away, the soldiers wantonly fired into a little

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group of women and children trapped against a wall. A woman with a baby in her arms went down.

At this the Americans no longer hesitated. Their safest course, they realized, lay in not taking sides, but witnessing the bloody slaughter of innocent people, they swung into action. Nora even snatching her carbine from its scabbard. She wasn't sure which side those soldiers belonged to, nor did it matter; their rifle fire had to be stopped. And stopped it was at the first volley from the American guns. The soldiers fled.

"We'd better be gittin' outa here," Sandy urged again. "Unless," he said hopefully, "we decide to ride into this ruckus an' join one side or t'other. Bet we c'd lick both outfits."

Their way out of San Telmo to the east and south was blocked by little battles. Courtney leading, the American riders struck west on a gallop, and swinging wide, emerged on a street above the plaza. Here Colonel Corrado and his soldiers were falling back slowly, making a stubborn resistance to the advance of superior numbers. Seeing Courtney, the Colonel rode over to greet him. The Colonel, white-moustached, with the ramrod carriage of a soldier, saluted when he was introduced to Nora, and smiled.

There was no cooler man in town than the Colonel, although no one better realized the hopelessness of the fight he was making. Already driven back from the plaza, and retreating to keep from being surrounded, inevitably his force would be besieged in the fort. And after that, the end would be certain.

Cole tried persuading the officer to take his troops

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and accompany them to *Hacienda Encantada*, there to make a stand in defence of the all-important horses. For answer the Colonel waved a hand at the flag floating from its standard in the parade-ground above. He did not need to speak : the gesture showed that he would defend the fort from the rebels as long as it was possible. The fort was not important, but time was. Delaying the rebels in San Telmo, holding up their advance against other cities until loyal troops could be rushed in—that was his plain duty as Colonel Corrado saw it. When capture was finally inevitable and a matter of only minutes, he promised to cut his way out with his men and ride to join the Americans at *Hacienda Encantada.*

The fighting, for all the noise of the guns, had not yet become a very deadly affair, but the rebels were bringing more and more rifles into action. *El Matador*, Ontra, and Rodriquez had been taken by surprise, but they were fast organizing their forces, trying to bring system into the loose every-man-for-himself battle. The loss of the Kilgour guns had hurt the rebels ; their chief supply of ammunition was in the fort and Corrado stood stubbornly in the way.

A single street now lay between the Federals and the fort. Along this Corrado's soldiers took a stand, climbing to the roof-tops of the houses. Below a bugle was sounding a rebel advance, and Major Ontra and Matador prepared to lead an attack that they were determined would end only with the capture of the fort. A fresh burst of shouts of *"Viva El Matador !"* drowned out the bugle.

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Rifle bullets began to sing about the heads of the Americans. Corrado peremptorily ordered them out of the firing zone, telling them to ride on to look after the horses. Courtney nodded and, calling *"Adios"* to the Colonel, started out with his little band of riders just as a group of Ontra's soldiers appeared.

Some officer among them yelled to his men to fire, shouting *"Muerto de los Americanos!"* Evidently he expected them to flee at once ; instead, the Americans charged to open a way to the country. Courtney and Sandy were in the lead ; the other men had fallen in to make a hollow square about Nora, the Countess Berdoo, and little Mickey. Before that impetuous rush, the opposition melted. Two of Ontra's soldiers went down as they fled, and the horses had to hurdle their bodies. Spurring hard, the little party thundered past the adobe jacals on the edge of town, clattered down the gravelly bank of an arroyo, and pulled up.

Guns were sounding behind them furiously, but there was no pursuit. The rebels were too busy disposing of the Colonel who had now fallen back to the thick-walled fort.

One of the Falconer riders had received a bullet through the calf of a leg, but he laughed at it, doused it with a little whisky, and was ready to go on.

Quail piped cheerfully in the arroyo, contrasting with the harsh crash of rifles above. Courtney smiled down at Nora. "How do you like Mexico and her brand of revolutions ? My guess is if it's not over in a few days, it may last a couple of years. One thing is sure : if that gang gets hold of this part of the country we're

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done for. Our ranches will be looted, burned, and if we don't win in a race for the Border, we'll be finished off, too. Maybe we should have stayed neutral, but we've declared ourselves by running off the horses, and there's no going back. From now on, it'll be bullets in our beans."

Nora realized all that. And she knew too that if *El Matador* got his paws on her, there'd be no bullets for her, but worse. Before that happened she'd be with the men who would be killed fighting in defence of their homes.

Riding after the horse herd, trotting fast under a yellow cloud of dust, they saw behind them another cloud of dust moving rapidly from the town. Fifteen men perhaps in the group, sent out by the rebel leaders, they guessed, in pursuit of the big horse herd.

The Americans fanned out at once and recklessly charged the group. The Mexicans dismounted hastily, not liking the looks of that oncoming line of ranchers. Lying prone, the San Telmo force opened a fast but inaccurate fire. Promptly the Americans split, Courtney and half a dozen men racing to the side to attack on a flank. Some of the Mexican horses began to go down, and with the prospect of being left afoot, the Mexicans decided that they had very pressing business back in San Telmo. Mounting, those who had lost horses doubling up with their *compañeros*, they hustled back to San Telmo in a wild flight.

Triumphant, the ranchers rode on, and after an hour of fast travel came up with the drags of the horse herd, moving in a long line across country.

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"Goin' smooth as silk," said Bill Horn who was in charge of the riders. "How'd she come out in Telmo?"

Courtney told him. The horses, pushed along steadily, would reach the hacienda the following morning. Likewise the guns confiscated from the Kilgour wagons should reach the ranch at about the same time. With those guns arming the employees on the *Encantada* ranch and the neighbouring outfits, they had at least a chance to stop an attack on the big, thick-walled house of the hacienda. There would be room for the horses in the big corrals of the place. Courtney's neighbours, the Knight brothers, had already ridden on ahead to get the big ranch building in shape for defence.

Meanwhile Courtney and the other riders were left with nothing to do. Which it was plain to see irked Cole Courtney.

"Somehow," he declared, "I don't feel like riding on to wait. I think we ought to go back to bring up Corrado. That Mex deserves help in making his getaway. He's done us a good turn in holdin' up that crowd long enough for us to get away with the horses."

Sandy whooped. "Count me in; been thinkin' the same myself," he said, and the rest volunteered at once. From the Falconer horses they proceeded to cut out fresh mounts for themselves. Cole was expecting Nora and the Countess, with Mickey, to ride on to the hacienda, but he found the girl calmly roping out a horse for herself. He galloped over to protest, but Nora was ready for him.

"I agree with you that the Colonel is a pretty decent sort," said Nora. "I can go along to hold horses.

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You'll need someone for that, Cole. It will be safe enough ; none of their plugs can catch Dad's horses if it comes to a race. Now, please don't argue."

Cole threw up his hands, laughing. "I'm not arguing. You're in the party. It's easy to see you'll get along in Mexico."

The Countess likewise announced that she was going back to have another look at the battle. She never let a chance pass to see something exciting, and she wasn't passing up a ready-made war.

On the back trail fifteen men and the two women rode, keeping a sharp lookout for other parties of rebels who might possibly have been sent out to stop the herd. In San Telmo just then, however, the rebels had no men to spare. Corrado was putting up a savage fight, had repulsed two attacks on the fort. Night would tell a different story ; by a mass rush in the darkness, starting from all sides simultaneously. Corrado could not possibly hold out.

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CHAPTER XVIII

NORA PROPOSES: SANDY DISPOSES

THE crash of gun-fire was a booming thunder over the fort as the small troop of riders approached San Telmo. Knowing how few men the white-moustached old hero of a Corrado had under him, it was easy to guess from the number of guns opposing him that he could not last long.

Courtney, entering the town alone at dusk, established contact with Mexican friends who were loyal to the government. The rebels, they told him, were getting ready to make their final rush: it would come within the hour. *El Matador* and Ontra had announced that they would grant no quarter; they were going to butcher the defenders down to the last man, making a bloody example for the benefit of those who might later dare to defy *El Matador*.

One of Courtney's friends volunteered for the perilous job of slipping in word to Corrado, and Cole sent in a note. The end was inevitable; if Corrado should cut his way out now with his remaining men, he would save himself and them for later fighting. He had held off as long as he could, and Cole's small force would be ready to help in the escape.

The messenger returned in half an hour. Colonel

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Corrado had agreed to abandon the fort, after setting fire to the surplus arms and supplies. He gave the exact minute that he and his men would make what would be a desperate attempt to break through the besiegers at the north wall. Cole, if he wished to help, should come to that side and make a diversion when the sortie began. Afterwards, they would join forces and flee for *Hacienda Encantada.*

Promptly the American group circled the city to take a station on a brushy hillside north of the fort, which was little more than a thick-walled barracks. The firing had died to an occasional burst of shots. The rebel forces were getting ready for the final attack, a rush from all sides that was to end with the massacre of the besieged.

Undetected on the hill behind the rebel lines the Americans waited, part afoot, part mounted. Cole had taken Nora at her word; she and the Countess had been given the job of staying with the horses of the dismounted men.

They waited anxiously until exactly at the appointed time, the north gate of the high wall was flung open, and yelling savagely, Colonel Corrado and his men spurred out.

In their path after a startled moment the rebel guns opened up, while simultaneously Cole's party made a feint, charging to meet Corrado, shooting and yelling, making three times as much noise as they had a right to make. This outside attack was a shock to the encircling lines of men: their first guess was that Federal troops had arrived to help the Colonel.

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Before they had recovered enough from the surprise to guess it was only the attempt of a handful of men to assist Corrado's escape, the retreating defenders had ridden up the slope, brushing aside the foes that barred their way. Behind them the guns crashed in a belated thunder, followed by a rush of men afoot, helped by a few mounted soldiers. It was too late: Corrado and Cole, joining forces, were loping off, firing back as they went. The mounted rebels were too few to dare pursuit.

Behind them *El Matador's* men swarmed into the fort. He was at last the triumphant conqueror of San Telmo, although the victory had not come quite as the board of strategy had planned it. So far the revolution had had an inauspicious beginning. The horses they had counted on were being driven off; the guns and ammunition brought down by the Kilgours were missing; and the supply of arms and cartridges in the fort's arsenal had been destroyed.

Half a dozen of the Colonel's force had been too badly hurt in the fighting to make the long ride to *Encantada*; these were left at a ranch, and the rest pushed on. Riding hard, at a little past midnight they came up with the horse herd briskly moving forward.

They halted an hour before dawn, on the edge of a broad valley which marked the beginning of the vast territory of the *Hacienda Encantada.* Americans and Mexicans ate together in friendly comradeship. Colonel Corrado, who had been an attaché in Mexican embassies, and the Countess exchanged French over one of the

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cook fires. Sandy who had got fond of the Countess glowered at the officer.

Nora smiled happily, watching the dawn slowly come over the valley of what was to be her new home, if she lived through the revolution. A strange country this, and a strange people, hard, cruel in many ways, and in others admirable. She would get used to country and people, and there would be Cole. He sat close to her, and she went to sleep for a few moments, head pillowed against his shoulder, starting awake suddenly to find him smiling tenderly down at her.

They had not long to rest. Lin Button hustled up, anxious to get the horses behind the thick walls of the ranch.

"Le's move out," the Texan urged. "Last lap of the Falconer-Kilgour trail drive, an' the sooner we-all git it finished, the bettuh."

Nora nodded. They had brought up a fresh horse for her. The men were rolling their after-breakfast cigarettes.

The last lap of their long, venturesome journey, but small comfort to that with an army probably already moving against them and the prospect of fighting off that army until help came. Panic suddenly seized her, contemplating what lay before them. The scenes of the bloody fighting she had witnessed in San Telmo came back vividly. And these men, her father's riders, Lin, Sandy, and the rest, who had worked for her father for years, were now willing to fight a desperate battle to defend what was after all just a form of property. She had no right to ask them to coop

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themselves behind walls to protect the herd of Brand Falconer.

Instead of trying to defend the horses, they could drive them into the hills and turn them loose, hoping that by the time the rebels had them gathered, Federal troops would be hurrying into the country.

She simply had no right to expect or allow those hard-bitten riders to sacrifice their lives to save Brand Falconer's horses. This she suddenly put in words to Sandy, Lin Button, and the others. They would scatter the horses in the foothills and afterwards all flee to safety. The men heard her out in silence, and then they just looked at her. She could see that they were hurt. And so that was what Nora Falconer thought of them—that they would quit when they were most needed.

"Hell's bells!" growled Sandy finally. "Us let them greasers throw their sweaty flat-horned rigs on them Morgans! While we ride off without firin' a shot. Yuh want us t' go back an' tell yore dad we was afraid to risk our hides. Goddlemighty, Nora, you sure can't be in earnest."

Nora was silent. Sandy had spoken for all of them. Loyalty such as theirs could not be purchased, and tears welled suddenly in the girl's blue eyes. They were in Mexico, but she was talking to Americans, people of the breed found above the Border, men who held themselves equal to the man who paid their wages, the most independent and the most loyal of all men—the American cow-boy.

Ashamedly feeling that she had insulted them, Nora

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stood looking at them through her tears. She could have kissed each and every one. Yet any expression of gratitude would only have made them uneasy, embarrassed. And as for herself if she had said anything soft, she knew she would break down.

"All right," she snapped, "forget it, you stubborn old rannyhan. Have it your own way. I was only foolin' anyway. Get shot up and see if I care."

Which relieved the tension. And swinging into saddles, they spurred off to crack rope-ends against the rumps of the nearest horses, stampeding the grazing Morgans into a wild flight. The riders up at point and along the flanks yelled, and raced to haze the fleet animals back into line. Smoothly, swifty the river of horses flowed on, manes and tails streaming, the leaders of the column disappearing into the mists that were slowly rising ahead. Beneath their myriad hoofs the ground seemed to tremble ; above them a yellow snaky cloud floated against the grey of the dawn.

As Nora raced alongside Cole Courtney the wine of the morning air exhilarated her, dispelled the panic that had seized her momentarily. Everything was going to be all right. It couldn't be otherwise with men like Sandy and Lin to fight her battles. Let *El Matador* bring up a thousand men, even two. The Falconer riders, Cole and his neighbours, and Colonel Corrado's handful would be behind walls of thick adobe, prepared to hang and rattle until hell froze over.

She took off her sombrero and challenged Cole to a race. Her coppery hair was whipped back by the wind, and Cole, reaching out a hand to caress the vagrant

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tresses, laughed. Nora echoed the laugh joyously. To ride with Cole on a good horse, following other good horses, in grass-carpeted country like this that had never known drought—life could offer nothing better.

Her exultation was broken suddenly when Sandy Neil came angling in on them, to point backward. Behind them the mists, slowly rising, showed the dull glitter of ornamented saddle gear, revealed shadowy horses and riders through a column of dust. Astonishingly close that long moving line, and the number appalled Nora.

El Matador and Major Ontra must have left as soon as the fort had fallen, commandeering every horse in San Telmo to mount men for the chase. The rebels, already caught napping several times, were evidently determined to more than make up for their previous blunders. Capturing *Hacienda Encantada* and the Falconer and Kilgour horses, they would sweep on to the next town, a railroad point at which they could load army and horses, and transport them to fresh conquests.

For a moment Nora's heart failed her; they were but a handful of people against the horde sweeping down on them. They would never be able to hold back that oncoming army, made up largely of veterans from other revolutions, not rabbit-like peons who had never known what it was to own a firearm.

Cole Courtney she saw was grim, as he gazed back. He realized more clearly than Nora the desperate struggle ahead, the overwhelming odds that must be met.

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From the pursuers, coming faintly through the morning air, came the sound of a bugle, the notes that of *El Matador's* toreador signal. In answer to its challenge came one lusty, defiant yell from the Americans. Then they dashed forward to haze on the horse herd in what would be a close race to reach the shelter of the hacienda walls.

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CHAPTER XIX

THE ENCHANTED HACIENDA

NORA FALCONER had been in a hundred races in her young life, but the one to reach *Hacienda Encantada* ahead of the rebel soldiers of *El Matador* and Major Ontra outdid them all in thrills.

Hazed at top speed, the long column of Falconer-Kilgour horses galloped in a mad flight that churned up thick, billowing clouds of dust. Behind them and along their flanks the trail drivers, yelling, shooting, spurred their mounts to a final effort.

Under the heavy impact of many hundreds of pounding hoofs, the whole valley seemed to shake, while the air was filled with a rumbling thunder, a hollow drumming produced probably by the sounding-board of vast underground caverns.

Up at point, Lin Button was all but run over; the little Texan had to rake his mount mercilessly to keep in the lead. Stretched out in a line that lengthened gradually, the hundreds of horses, glimpsed through the smother of dust, made a spiriting, eye-filling spectacle. Seeing them, the rebel pursuers raised an exultant shout. With those mounts providing *El Matador's* army with seven-league boots, the door to all of North Mexico would be thrown open.

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Corrado and his gallant little troop of Federal soldiers fell back to hold up the pursuit, but they were too few to check the army from San Telmo. The Colonel was forced to spur hard after the drags to keep his command from being smothered by the advancing force.

As they topped a rise and swung left into a corner of the long valley, Nora Falconer with a little exclamation checked her horse. A few miles ahead lay the goal of their long drive, *Hacienda Encantada.* The ranch lay in the mouth of a canyon, enclosed in the protecting folds of a towering mountain peak. Seen in the brilliant sunlight against the green flanks of the mountain, the white walls of its buildings and octagonal defence towers, with a few splashes of tile, gave the impression of a pretty little old-world hill town.

Whatever Spanish don had chosen the ranch site had had an eye for beauty and utility. With its back to the grim mountain, the ranch looked watchfully out on the valley, alert to defend itself against the enemies which had beset it for two centuries. With its eight octagonal towers it was a fortress, yet its white gleaming walls, with a carpet of lush grass unrolling to a tree-bordered stream, made a picture that earned the name which a proud owner had given it—of the Enchanted Hacienda.

Adding a grim note, the high walls of the buildings were windowless, doorless; when holding off an attack the fighting was done from the flat roofs. High adobe-walled corrals and yards provided shelter against attacking guns for nearly two thousand head of horses

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or cattle. Some fifty yards from the ranch buildings and corrals a six-foot wall of unplastered adobe brick and capped with cement surrounded the whole compact unit. This wall was intended as first-line defence.

Towards the hacienda the column of horses with its riders rolled while guns popped behind them. A few shots sang over the riders bringing up the drags, but the dust provided cover against accurate aim by the pursuers. Meanwhile the fleet herd was holding its own in the race, finishing far ahead of the troops from San Telmo, as the horses flowed in a stream towards the wide gates in the brown outer wall.

There Cole Courtney's neighbour, Stacy Knight, who had ridden the previous night to prepare the hacienda for resistance, met them with a score of riders, brown-skinned *vaqueros*, who helped haze the horses into the various corrals.

There were two buildings, both square, rambling structures containing several hundred rooms. The one lying on the east, the plainer, provided living-quarters for the many Mexicans usually employed on the huge ranch, and in addition contained granaries, harness, saddle and blacksmith shops, a grist mill, wagon and implement sheds, and half a dozen enormous corrals or yards for working horses and cattle—and, in times of danger, of protection for as much livestock as could be crowded into them. To the west a few yards away, between which lay small corrals, sat a more ornate building, with three courts and many strings of rooms which served as residence for the owner and his foreman, and could easily provide accommodation for

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the dozens of guests who in bygone days had visited the hacienda.

Inside the brown wall there was for a few moments a hopeless confusion, with milling, whickering horses dashing about wildly ; then under the direction of Cole Courtney, Stacy Knight and Lin Button, the animals were swiftly cut into bands and shoved into the corrals and yards. The wide gates of the outer wall were hastily barricaded. Behind this, facing the valley, Corrado's men took places, holding their rifles ready.

El Matador, after seeing that his enemies had won the race, slackened speed, dropping to a leisurely jog-trot, but still heading straight for the ranch.

Nora helped shove a bunch of horses into a yard under the protecting height of one of the high octagonal defence towers and pulled up her panting mount. About her yelling riders were pursuing the last few loose horses, chasing the animals in and out of small dust clouds. Gates were being slammed on filled yards. One of the sweat- and dust-begrimed riders gave a whoop as he pulled up alongside Nora.

"We beat 'em," said Cole exultantly. "But not much of a homecoming for you, Nora. The new mistress of *Hacienda Encantada* deserves at least a sixteen-gun salute."

"Those rifles of Matador's will be salute enough, thank you," said Nora drily. "And I wish there were only sixteen of them."

Courtney led the way through an arched gateway into the first of the three courts in the headquarters building on the west. Inside the first patio they found

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a chattering confusion—brown-faced women and children and babies who had been hastily moved from the employees' quarters in the other building. The smaller structure occupied by the owner was deemed to offer better security.

Nora had scarcely time to look about her, observing the neatly kept grass and shrubs of the courts, the arched doors and deeply inset windows of the many rooms. Since the outside walls were blank, all light came from the courtyards. There was a fountain in each patio, supplied like the tanks and water-troughs by an underground pipe from springs several miles up the canyon.

Cole sprang down and swung Nora from her saddle. "Welcome to your new home, Señorita Falconer," he said, and just then a clap of rifle fire came from Corrado's men behind the outer wall.

Nora laughed, then became grave. The horses corralled, men were hurrying to climb ladders to the flat roof-tops, to crouch behind the parapets—continuations nearly four feet high of side walls. These were conveniently loopholed for rifles, as were the octagonal towers, relics of old Apache days, and still useful in defence against more modern warriors.

Courtney, carrying his carbine, hastily joined the others on the roof. And Nora, taking her rifle from her saddle scabbard, climbed up the ladder from the courtyard. Corrado and his soldiers, with some of the American leasors of the hacienda range and their Mexican riders, were to defend the east building with its big yards. Nora's riders and those of Cole Courtney

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and the Knight brothers, with their cowboys and the *vaqueros* of the hacienda, were to defend the headquarters building. Here Cole, Sandy Neil, and Stacy Knight were to share responsibility of leadership.

Swiftly the men were divided into squads, each in charge of a captain who had assigned to him a certain zone of defence. As she reached the flat roof Sandy's hoarse bellow sounded from the right where he was in command of a section of wall and one of the towers. Lin Button's high-pitched Texas yip came from the north roofs, across the court.

Nora stood by Cole's shoulder looking over the parapet at the endless flat dirt roofs and the yards of the other buildings which were filled with milling horses—the stakes of the coming battle. Below the houses, across the fifty yards or so of clear space to the outer wall, were the backs of the Corrado Federal soldiers, now reduced to something like forty men.

In the valley near the line of trees that marked the course of a stream, *El Matador* and Major Ontra were jogging forward again, planning, as it appeared, a reckless charge that by one deadly push would sweep aside all resistance.

All along the roofs and in the octagonal towers the defenders were watching the advance, waiting for that fanned-out line of charging riders to get in range.

For a moment a little hush held the whole ranch, and during that lull Nora forgot the approaching battle. She drew a deep breath, looking at the miracle of the white walls and green patios. "Enchanted—it's

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a good name," she told Cole. "It's worth fighting for, even if we didn't have the horses."

"Worth fighting for," agreed Courtney quietly, and moved over to shift the position of some of the *vaqueros*. Many of them Nora noticed had Indian faces, Mexican Indians, probably chiefly of the Yaqui tribe. All were calm. This was old stuff to them. Just another revolution, and you either got killed or you didn't. Nothing to get excited about.

"Good fighters, these *hombres*, and there's enough rifles to arm the last one, thanks to the Kilgours," Cole told Nora. "Stacy Knight issued guns and cartridges this morning early enough so they had a little time for target practice. A lot of the poor devils never had a decent gun in their hands before.

"We're ready for 'em, Nora," he went on confidently. "Corrado is to fall back to the other building when it gets too hot for him out there. We figure to hold both buildings, but we had all the women and children brought here just in case we can't. This headquarters building is the last-stand position; it's smaller, and without the big yards over there. But if all of us do have to retreat here, it means losing your horses. Now don't you wish that you had let us stampede 'em that night?"

"No," returned Nora. "If I hadn't brought them down I wouldn't have been with you now. I'd be up there swearing at you as we tried to round up in desert country."

"What can I say when you put it that way?" asked Cole, smiling. "I wish you half-way meant it. You're

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a smart girl, Nora," he teased her, "to bring down your dang *caballos*, and then make all of us fight to protect 'em."

"Nobody asked you to, sir," Nora retorted.

Their eyes met and for a long moment they looked at each other, dropping all their playful pretence. They loved one another; there was no getting away from that. It placed rose-coloured glasses over their eyes; made Cole supremely confident of holding back *El Matador*, while Nora, seeing the many men available for defence, shared his belief. *Hacienda Encantada* and its strong walls would not fail them, and she patted the cement cap of the parapet approvingly, as one would pat the head of a faithful dog.

From the trees of the creek far to one side of the moving column of San Telmo riders, a single horse, a fleet grey, emerged to race desperately for the nearest gate of the outer wall. From the roofs fifty rifles were trained on the rider, and then the guns were dropped from shoulders. The rider of the grey pony was a girl, and Cole gave a sudden grunt. Conchita, the dancer, the jilted sweetheart of *El Matador*.

Cole shouted an order to the men near a gate and the barricade was hastily opened. The girl as she rode inside scanned the heads sticking above the walls of the roof, and came towards Cole.

"I don't know about this Conchita," Cole remarked to Nora. "She handed us some valuable information in San Telmo, but you never can tell which side she's on. If she's going to stay with us we'll have to watch her."

The dancer, dressed in a black skirt and flowered,

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loose camisa, and a pair of officer's boots much too large for her, pulled up below Cole, to fling voluble Spanish at him. *El Matador* had recruited every available fighting man in San Telmo, Conchita announced. Those who had been able to provide horses were in the party now loping on the ranch ; the others, a lot more, would arrive later. The girl flung her arms wide to show how many more men were coming. Thousands, she declared, who had secured arms despite the capture of the Kilgour guns, all coming to help smash the hacienda. Cole had no chance ; he had better run.

One of Cole's neighbours asked Conchita what had become of her friend, the officer under Ontra with whom she had been solacing the wounds left by *El Matador's* jilting. Conchita only made a face and, announcing that she was going to help fight against the villainous rebels, rode off to put her horse in a corral.

"Maybe she's all right and maybe not," muttered Cole. "She's a trouble-maker. And as for her news, Conchita exaggerates a lot. Or maybe she's only come to throw a scare in us."

"And maybe she only wants to be near you, Cole," suggested Nora slyly.

There was no time for further talk. The soldiers of *El Matador* and Major Ontra as they neared the ranch were spurring their horses to racing speed. The leaders of the wild charge would soon be in gun range.

That long front of galloping horses and riders made a spectacle that Nora would never forget. In the cloud of dust the riders raised, Nora thought she could identify among them *El Matador*, now in a flashy, gold-

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epauletted military uniform, and the tall figure of Harge Kilgour. There were riders of all kinds: uniformed soldiers under Major Ontra, Indians on shaggy ponies, town men on poor mounts, *vaqueros* with their flat-horned saddles—a motley horde that had joined the revolution for the licence it gave them to kill and loot. There seemed no end to the riders charging through the yellow haze.

And then the hacienda rifles broke out almost as one, sending a bellowing tumult into the sky. Along the line of riders, men began to fall from saddles, as if invisible hands had shoved them violently to the ground. Horses were falling also, sending their riders tumbling head over heels, falling under the drumming hoofs that followed, to have their lives flailed out as wheat is separated from chaff on a threshing floor.

It seemed unreal to Nora, until a Mexican rider of Courtney's sank to the roof not twenty feet from her, clutching a smashed arm that was turning crimson with blood. After that it was real enough and Nora found herself suddenly pressing the trigger of her carbine, aiming at individuals in the ranks of riders.

Under the deadly punishment of the rifles the attack crumpled. A bugle shrilled out a command. Dismayed by the slaughter, afraid to ride back under the accurate fire, the leaders of the charging men flung themselves from saddles to race towards the shelter of the six-foot adobe wall surrounding the ranch. There were so many of these that Colonel Corrado's men were forced to retreat, to take their places on the roofs. Suffering terrific losses, *El Matador's* force had gained

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a strategic point, the adobe wall, within striking-distance of the buildings.

Out in the valley riderless horses were running loose, heading back for the open valley in wild flight, the stirrups of their saddles swinging wildly. A few crippled animals were struggling to rise, some to hobble on a few steps before going down to lie kicking pitifully. Likewise, there were dead and crippled men, some of the latter crawling back towards the creek.

Cole swore under his breath as the enemy rifles from behind the six-foot outer wall opened up at short range. "I always said that blasted wall was only a help to an attacking bunch," he stated. "It may stop a charge by the Light Brigade, but it's ready-made cover for men afoot. Take my advice, Nora, and have it knocked down at the first chance. Whoa ; I forgot I swore off on offering you advice."

"If we ever get out of this," said Nora fervently, "I'll take all the advice you can give. I've sworn off on not taking advice, only I'm afraid it may be too late."

Bernardine Falconer, otherwise known as the Countess Berdoo, Nora's Eastern relative, had been watching the battle in the role of a non-combatant observer through a pair of field-glasses. Laying these aside, she strode over to Cole. "May I inquire what arrangement, General, you have made for a Red Cross unit ?" she asked. "Going to be a lot of you fool men who will need patching up before this is over."

"We never thought about a hospital," admitted Cole.

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"You wouldn't. It's my opinion," remarked the Countess Berdoo frankly, "that you men don't deserve being looked after, but I'll go down and clean out some rooms. One of my husbands happened to be a physician in charge of a hospital, and I absorbed a little knowledge about nursing. I could even make a stab at sawing off a leg or two."

"Ain't that hopeful?" said Sandy Neil sourly. "Me, I'm hoping I'll get one of these here nice wounds that jist graze the head and put you in a daze for the rest of the fight."

"If a bullet ever hits your head," said the Countess, "it would only likely knock out a few splinters of wood. You'll be needing a carpenter, not a surgeon."

"It's goin' t' be a waste o' time takin' care of the wounded in this battle," said Sandy. "When yuh lose, it's a old Mex custom to bump everybody off—wounded included. Don't worry yore head about no hospital, Countess. These Mexican ruckuses go on for weeks and the only people whut gets injured in 'em is some dumb *hombre* whut gits so drunk he shoots hisself by mistake."

With brisk efficiency the Countess descended the ladder, to begin issuing orders in her mannish voice. Two large rooms were cleared of furniture, and beds and cots brought in. Two badly hurt soldiers from Corrado's forces were the first patients.

Out front the firing died away. From behind the wall a rifle barrel with a white cloth tied to it was projected and waved vigorously back and forth.

"Somebuddy out there," remarked Sandy, "likely

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wantin' t' be invited in for a drink. Want to palaver, Cole ?"

"Sure, we'll *habla* with them," said Cole. "Nothing like being hospitable, and what they say ought to give us a good laugh."

No gate being opened for them, the rebel emissaries, three in number, were forced to clamber over the six-foot wall. First came Harge Kilgour, awkwardly hoisting his big body over the barricade. Then followed Major Ontra and finally *El Matador*, vaulting the wall with an agile skill gained from his long practice in flinging himself over bullring barriers.

The trio strode across the clear space until they stood beneath the wall of the headquarters building.

"What do you snakes want ?" called down Cole.

"They jist probably want to borry a match," snickered Sandy. "Or Matty wants t' hand us a invite to his next bullfight. And ain't he a sweet looker in that general's uniform ?"

"We have come," declared *El Matador* pompously, "to inform you of the terms on which we will accept your surrender !"

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CHAPTER XX

DAUGHTER OF A HACENDADO

WHILE Cole was held speechless by the cool impudence of this statement, *El Matador* drew himself to his full height and contemptuously waved his hand at the white walls above him.

"Of course," he stated, "you will admit you have to surrender. We outnumber you over five to one, and most of your men are mere peons, who will run like rabbits when we climb the roofs."

"When and *if* you climb 'em, fella," returned Cole. "And I'd like to lay a bet with you that they don't run. But get on with your talk, Matty. What are your terms?—not that we're interested."

"Our terms are this," *El Matador* went on arrogantly. "You to lay down your guns and walk out—that is all."

"Tell you what," countered Cole. "We'll make *you* a proposition. The poor saps that loped over here with you don't know what this revolution is all about, and they won't get anything out of it except a bullet through their middles. Why not let three men from each side fight it out? Our three will be one man from the Falconers, one from the American ranchers—I'll volunteer to be him—and Colonel Corrado representing

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the Government. We'll meet you, *El Matador*, and Kilgour and Major Ontra, scrapping it out with anything you'd suggest from fists and pocket-knives up to shotguns. That way we'll sorta concentrate the bloodshed and save a lot of women from becomin' widows."

El Matador smiled sourly at this pleasantry. "You joke, eh?" he said. "It will be no joke when we get to those roofs."

"Again when, and *if*," returned Cole insultingly. "Matty, fighting bulls that shut their eyes when they charge has kinda ruined your judgment. You're fighting men here."

Major Ontra turned to *El Matador*, spoke swift Spanish. "Further talk is useless," he declared. "We have given them their chance. When we attack now, it will be to kill every person behind these walls."

"Except those we might like to keep as prisoners," said *El Matador* as his eyes dwelt on Nora. "The beautiful American señorita we would not want to see suffer such a hard fate. She might prefer to ride with us, to——"

"Matty," called down Cole, "skip back over that wall before I come down to take your dirty little carcass apart, truce or no truce. *Vamos*, you fake bullfighter, and pick yourself a good-lookin' adobe wall to stand blindfolded against when the Federals come."

"The Federals," spat out *El Matador*. "There are no Federals in this part of Mexico any more. The garrisons at San Ignacio, Olivares and La Guarda have already joined *el revolucion*. *Adios*, little one—until later." He blew a kiss at Nora and turned to go.

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"Hold on," said Harge Kilgour, opening his mouth for the first time. "I got something to say here. I demand our horses. We brought them down to sell; they belong to us."

Nora standing by Cole's side stiffened a little. Although Harge Kilgour had been her neighbour for years, she had really never known the man until this Mexican journey. On the drive he had shown himself a scoundrel, a thief, a liar, and a coward too, when he had backed down before his half-brother, *El Matador*.

"Let him take his horses," she told Cole.

"No-siree," said Courtney positively. "Big Boy Kilgour will only get his horses if he's big enough to take 'em. Harge," he remarked, "it'll be a little hard to cut your horses out right now. After the Federals come, we'll be glad to do it for you if you'd still be interested. And after you've stood trial for trying to have Brand Falconer killed."

"That's true, isn't it, Harge?" called Nora. "That you ordered someone to try to kill my father? So that the way would be clear to sell our horses to the rebels."

Harge grinned, his unshaven face looking suddenly wolfish. "Supposin' I did?" he retorted. "What yuh doin' about it? You're done for. I don't mind admitting I hired a *hombre* to bump off yore old man."

Nora raised her rifle without conscious volition, and for a few seconds Harge Kilgour faced death. None of the Falconer riders nor Cole Courtney certainly would have interfered to keep her from shooting. Brand Falconer had no son to avenge that treacherous shot

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which had brought him to death's door—but just in time Nora remembered that this man, even though he was a would-be murderer, was here under a flag of truce.

Harge under the threat of death whipped his big paw down to his gun, but *El Matador* at his side hissed a command. One shot here and *El Matador* realized that none of the three would live to climb back over that wall. Major Ontra growled and hastily retreated, and the other two followed with alacrity. The interview was over.

At the wall *El Matador* turned to remove his hat and to make a mocking bow. The little dancer, Conchita, pushed between Nora and Cole at the parapet and shouted at him, shook her tiny fist.

"*El Matador*, the wonderful general," she shouted mockingly. "You should never have left off sticking swords in bulls. It would have been safer. *Cabron! Cochinello! Peeg!*" She flung a few more pungent epithets which made *El Matador* shake with rage, then as a roar of laughter arose from the roofs he turned in confusion and vaulted over the wall.

"I hate him more than death," declared Conchita impetuously. "And to think that once I loved him more than life. I ask only one thing: to give the command to the firing squad when he is stood blindfolded before a wall."

Courtney grinned. *El Matador* had made a bitter enemy when he had disdained little Conchita, and yet Cole wasn't altogether convinced. Conchita was a born actress; she would have to be watched. *El*

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Matador might have spies among the hacienda defenders, who would seize any chance to help him, and Conchita might be one of them.

"Why do we not go out and attack them, *Azúcar?*" Conchita suggested to Cole, using her old nickname for him. "I tol' you there are many more men coming from San Telmo. Thousands and thousands. Too many for you. Now is your chance: rush right out and cut them down. Like this." And Conchita illustrated the cutting down process, sweeping her right arm through the air as if she were wielding a cavalry sabre. An attractive little figure she made, flushed with anger, and her dress slipping down to expose a satin-smooth bare shoulder. Trust Conchita to be able always to expose a little skin for the benefit of male observers.

"You are not a coward," she urged Cole. "Attack, my friend, before it is too late. Look, they are already coming—the people from San Telmo."

In the valley a few miles away, a huge dust-cloud had appeared, and as it drifted nearer, a curious spectacle was revealed. The reinforcements for *El Matador* had taken advantage of all available means of transportation, commandeering every wheeled vehicle in the town. A dozen different varieties of buggies, buckboards, old-fashioned surreys and lumbering coaches, heavy wagons, even ox-carts. All of these, jammed with men and a few women, were coming now as fast as the horses pulling them could be beaten into motion. Men in all sorts of uniforms, peons in cotton shirts and trousers and straw sandals, miners and labourers in their

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fiesta best, coming like a swarm of flies attracted by honey. All of them carried guns, of all descriptions and ages.

Cole's heart sank; apparently every able-bodied male in San Telmo had come to join the rebels. Enough men there to start a rush on all four sides of the ranch at once and by sheer force of numbers smother the defenders.

To Courtney the struggle here seemed suddenly altogether hopeless. Maybe by now the authorities at the capital might have ordered some garrison from a near-by city to advance into the San Telmo country. If they rode out at once, they should reach the hacienda some time that day. But things didn't move that promptly in Mexico. *Mañana* was too deeply ingrained in the philosophy of the people. The next day or the next week would be time enough to put down the insurrection, and before many *mañanas* half of Mexico might be in arms.

Colonel Corrado, who came to visit the little group on the roof, shook his head, sharing Cole's despondency. "Too many for us," he said. "Too many even before these came. You Americans had better saddle some of your excellent horses and ride for the Border. This is after all an affair that concerns only us Mexicans. I am a soldier and am done with running. But you," he addressed Courtney and Nora, "are young and you can raise other horses; build yourself another ranch."

"Mexico," said Cole firmly, "happens to concern me just now. And if we left, it would mean certainly that the ranch would be captured and all of our Mexican

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riders butchered. Some of them are men who worked for my father, and I'm not running off to leave them. But that does not apply to the Falconers; they owe Mexico nothing."

"If you're hinting," said Sandy Neil aggrievedly, "that we back out of this ruckus just when it's warming up, guess ag'in. But why not send out a bunch of Mexicans with a few of our riders up the canyon, to take out Nora and the Countess?"

Cole grinned. "A fine idea," he said, "if you can argue Nora into the notion. Personally, I value my skin too high to start that kind of talk with her. Never again. She'll stay——"

"And make you like it," put in Nora firmly.

"Awright," said Sandy, surrendering. "Le's go down and have a drink of this substitute they has for whiskey in this country. Two more drinks of that sotol pizen and I'll sashay out and whip that bunch single-handed."

The reinforcements pulled into the cover of the brush and trees of the creek below the ranch. *El Matador* seemed in no hurry to make an attack, believing that whenever he chose to move, the hacienda would fall as easily as a ripe apple is knocked to the ground with a stick. The smoke from many cook-fires arose at the creek as the *soldaderas* cooked a meal for the rebels.

Given a breathing spell, the warriors of the hacienda used the interval to snatch a little food and strengthen their defences, in preparation for the more serious attack that would come.

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Nora, with Cole as guide, took advantage of the lull to make a hurried survey of the headquarters building, inspecting the many rooms, all of which were filled with massive furniture made by artisans on the ranch and bearing the primitive dignity and beauty seen in most of the products of native labour in Mexico. The court around which her uncle had had his living-quarters was a charming affair, paved with multi-coloured flat stones and containing a small fountain and numerous dwarf trees and shrubs. In one corner hung huge wicker cages containing tropical birds.

During the armistice to take on *chili colorado*, *carne*, *frijoles*, and *tortillas*, the guns stopped. What seemed, after the crashing thunder of the rifles, like utter silence, descended on the hacienda. For a short interval Nora Falconer and Cole Courtney felt that they were enjoying some peaceful dream.

They sat down finally on a carved oak bench by the fountain. The thin column of water shot into the air to fall in a tinkling cascade on the pool with its lily-pads. A mocking-bird in one of the cages went through its repertory. Almost impossible to believe that the ranch lay under a deadly menace.

Cole slipped his arm about her waist, drew her close to him, until his face touched her soft cheek. "You've at least seen your house before they get in to loot it, and we've got a few minutes alone. We haven't really had time to really get acquainted, Nora, just snatching a few minutes together here and there. You don't even know me."

Nora laughed teasingly at that. "I know you well,

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Cole Courtney. You think maybe you are so deep that I have to know you years and years before I can make up my mind about you? All that matters is this: I know you well enough to realize I love you; always shall. I knew you well enough for that the first time I saw you, when you were an absolute stranger. What I find out about you later, I'll take a chance on. Except for that pretty little Conchita," she added sternly, drawing suddenly away from him. "Are you sure you're not in love with her, Cole? I couldn't blame you; she's so pretty, and I think she's in love with you."

"She's not pretty, compared with you, Nora." growled Cole. "That little fool doesn't know who she is in love with. She's generally smitten with anyone who falls for her."

"Am I to understand from that then that you fell for her?" demanded Nora quickly.

"No, hang it," floundered Cole. "When I was fifteen or sixteen, I guess I had a sort of puppy love for her. Before I learned anything about women."

"As if you have or ever will learn anything about us," scoffed Nora. "Just the same I'm going to watch little Conchita. I don't trust her. Calling you *Azúcar*—Sugar. She'd steal you in a minute if she could. And I wouldn't blame her."

"I don't trust her either," said Cole, "but not because she'd steal me. *El Matador* might have sent her on ahead to see what damage she could do in here. I intend to keep an eye on her myself. But let's forget Conchita."

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He drew Nora close to him, and his lips burned with a sudden intensity against hers.

"If I could only do something besides waiting for those blasted bandits to walk in on us. Or if we could only be sitting here with no hungry bandit gang squatted outside. But even then, Nora, you'd belong to the rich, what we call *ricos*, while I'm just a poor, struggling gringo rancher. Your father in owning *Encantada* is a *hacendado*, and only the sons of *hacendados* marry the daughters of *hacendados* in Mexico."

"Then I'll hope that the revolution leaves this daughter of a *hacendado* with nothing in the way of property but a pile of adobe bricks," declared Nora. "If you think I'm going to wait for you until you become a *rico*, you don't know me at all. I'm not in love with a hacienda with a lot of cattle and horses on it: I'm in love with you. Even if all you own is a saddle and a horse and a Dutch oven. That's plenty to set up housekeeping. Now what do you know about that?"

A sudden crash of shots sounded from the east building, followed by a chorus of yells that shattered at once the peace of the little court and the mood of the two people in it. Nora, with a little cry, flung herself against Courtney, whose arms all but crushed her in the pain of a parting that might well be for all time.

"I'm a coward, Cole," she confessed. "Afraid. Colonel Corrado thinks we've got no chance, and he's been fighting all his life and knows what we face. Cole, we can't let them ruin all we have to live for."

"We won't," said Cole huskily. "We'll win because

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we're fighting for something real, our right to live peacefully, to love. While those *pelados* of *El Matador* are fighting only for the chance to steal and kill. Matador and his kind never win, Nora."

The girl lifted her wet eyes, and as she looked at Cole, softly stroked the lean, hard face. She had been afraid of that hardness once, even while she loved Cole. But she was glad for that hardness now, the grim resolve and courage of a man who had been raised in this blood-drenched country. Only Cole's kind had a chance to win against the tremendous odds of *El Matador's* army.

His arms closed around her for one brief moment of happiness, and then she had to let him go; he was needed back on the roof with his men.

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CHAPTER XXI

SURPRISE PARTY

On the roof-tops men, still chewing the last of their dinners, were running to their stations. More and more of the rebel guns were getting into action, sending hails of bullets that whistled over the parapets or pitted the white surfaces of the walls. The horses began milling in the corrals again, kicking up dust. A little breeze spread the dust-cloud over the ranch, enveloping it in a yellowish haze.

Corrado's men shouted encouragement at the Americans at the headquarters building, and the Americans cheerfully answered. The Countess Berdoo had impressed several pairs of stolid-faced Indian women as stretcher-bearers.

"At last," said the Countess, "after years of a sinful, misspent life spent sampling husbands, I can be of some use in the world. These people have no more sense than to spatter a dirty cobweb over a bullet hole and call it first aid."

"Reserve a corner room in yore hospital for me—with a pretty señorita of a nurse to hold my hand, Countess," called Sandy Neil. "And if yuh got t' saw off a leg, I'd like a nurse for each paw."

"No chance of your getting hit," returned the

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Countess. "Any man that could dodge a bull like you dodged that *toro* at San Telmo yesterday won't have any trouble keeping out of the path of a few lead slugs."

Something seemed delaying the attack. Several times parties of *El Matador's* force started rushes, only to fall back at the last moment. These attacks started from the south and east, which was queer because better opportunity was given for an assault on the north. Here the major-domo in charge of the property had failed in his duty : he had permitted brush to spring up between the canyon ridge and the outer wall of the hacienda. But *El Matador* seemed to ignore the advantage of the cover afforded here, concentrating his men at the front.

"Probably too lazy to move 'em around," commented Courtney.

Then a bugle sounded, giving the signal that *El Matador* had made familiar in the ears of the Falconer trail drivers. It was repeated twice, that call taken from the bullring, the final act of the drama when the *espada* or matador proceeded to what Sandy described as the "bull-stickin'."

A little lull, then "We're off," bawled Sandy as the rebel guns suddenly mounted to a deafening roar. There was a rush of men towards the east building where Colonel Corrado had charge of the defence, but the first few rifle volleys easily stopped the force. Almost too easily, Cole thought, as the rebels seemed content again to send in a barrage of shots.

Louder and louder swelled the chorus of the guns outside the wall, mounting finally to a deafening

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crescendo. In the corrals the horses milled panic-stricken, churning up a heavier cloud of dust that cloaked both defenders and attackers.

"Wonder whut's holdin' 'em up," grumbled Sandy Neil. "They're actin' like a cow-boy shyin' at pickin' up a hot runnin'-iron. What's the idea of tootin' that bugle if they don't mean business?"

Everyone was asking the same question, anxious to meet the big attack that would bring the hundreds of men of *El Matador's* army.

Once more the bugle sounded sharply, and a concerted yell from the rebels. In another moment the wall would be black with men who would rush across the yard to try to get to the roofs. Some of the enemy were seen to be carrying ladders with iron hooks on one end to be used in scaling.

As they held their fire, Nora heard a half-strangled cry and looked across the court to the north roof. The guard posted there was down on his knees, wounded, but he was beckoning frantically.

"We'll be over to pick you up, *hombre*," called the Countess Berdoo soothingly, but the man still gestured to them, and shouted unintelligible words. The rest were too occupied to notice him, and Nora suddenly descended the ladder into the court and flew across it.

Something was happening on the north side, which, since it was not threatened, had been stripped of its defenders and left with but the one guard. Climbing the ladder swiftly, Nora flung herself across the roof to take one look.

Her heart almost stopped beating. Men were

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swarming over the wall at the north-west corner, after having stolen down unseen through the brush.

She whirled. "Cole!" she cried, her voice penetrating the din of the guns. "Cole, quick! The attack out front is all a fake to cover a rush here. Quick, Cole!"

Turning then, she flung her rifle to her shoulder to empty it at the men who were racing for the white wall below her. An exultant shout welled up from them as they ran forward: as soon as their ladders were placed, they would scramble up on the roof to fight it out on even terms with the defenders. At the same time their *compañeros* would rush *en masse* to attack the front.

There was a scramble of men to help Nora, Cole leading the race across the court. The wounded Mexican guard had been able to get back on his feet and was standing alongside the girl, emptying his rifle. Sandy Neil holding the south-west corner was galloping with his men over the long stretch of roofs to open a cross-fire.

The hooked irons of a scaling-ladder came up to fasten on the parapet top a few feet from Nora. Exerting all her strength, she flung down the ladder while a startled yell came from the man who had been climbing up it.

Then Cole was at Nora's side shoving her back while he straddled the parapet, a pair of six-shooters in his hands, shooting down at the men. Lin Button, Bill Horn, the Knight brothers, and two dozen Americans and Mexicans joined him. There was a

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mad welter of fighting at close range, the defenders pumping shots down on *El Matador's* little surprise party. The deadly shooting at close range was more than the rebels could stand; abandoning the ladders and their dead and wounded, they hustled back over the wall to throw themselves into the shelter of the brush.

"Close shave," was all that Cole remarked as he got down from the parapet and hastened back to the front where, angered by the failure of the surprise on the north, the rebels were at last starting their delayed attack. Successive waves of warriors flung themselves over the six-foot adobe wall and ran across to meet the deadly fire of the rifles on the roofs.

One rebel group managed to get a foothold in a small corral, but Courtney led a counter-attack that literally wiped out the bunch. All along the front the attackers had been flung back with bloody losses; it took more courage than the besiegers possessed to try to place ladders in the face of the accurate fire poured down on them.

Withdrawing stubbornly behind the wall that enclosed the ranch, they maintained a savage fire during the long, dragging hours of the afternoon. Above the beleaguered ranch, the dust-clouds of the milling horses, tinged with the odour of gun-powder smoke, grew thicker. Occasionally, while the sun slowly sank, a little group of Matador's men would feint an attack, but their heavy losses disheartened them.

The hacienda warriors had also suffered during the

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attacks: the more seriously hurt were put to bed by the Countess Berdoo; the others after their wounds had been disinfected and bandaged returned to the roof-tops. Colonel Corrado, meeting the brunt of most of the savage thrusts, had lost nearly half his force in casualties. *Vaqueros* from the ranch took their places, inspired by the bravery of the Colonel, who, during much of the time, walked along the roof-top, disdaining to crouch behind the parapet.

Slowly the sun seen dimly through the haze became an orange blur on the horizon. Only when dusk finally descended did the firing stop. Then again there was an armistice and a rebel retreat to the creek where the wood cook-fires sent their thin columns of smoke into the sky. There *El Matador's* soldiers were not only fed, but sotol in generous quantities was made available to all. At night, when shadows would succeed the glaring brightness of daylight, they would attack again, and this time there would be no stopping them. They could have taken the place during the day, but the leaders had agreed it would mean the loss of too many men.

Wearily the people of the ranch ate their suppers. Not daring to leave the roofs, they ate from the kettles of stew which had been carried up to them, keeping their rifles propped against their knees for immediate use in case of a surprise rush. Courtney and his American neighbours who ranched in Mexico and the Falconers had passed nearly two days and nights, either in the saddle or battling. Some of them now snatched a little sleep. This coming night, if they lasted through

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it, would be a sleepless one also. The haze that overhung the ranch lay, a purplish lake of floating dust, as the dusk deepened.

Above the hacienda a moon swung in the sky, a moon which held a reddish tinge through the haze. Solemnly Nora and Cole looked at it. They had seen a red moon before, shining down on the Rio, the time they had met just before the start of the fateful trail drive to Mexico.

"Red moon," Nora murmured. "Shining for our especial benefit. We're seeing it again, and I wonder, Cole, if we'll live ever to see another red moon."

There was no need for Cole to lie, to tell her that she was only talking nonsense. Stern enough stuff in Nora to face facts. Too many men out there ; the odds too great. Cole sat with his hands on his knees, back against the wall enclosing the roof, shoulders slumped. Nora had never seen him discouraged before.

Lifting his gaze from the earth roof, he looked up at the moon. His hand groped for hers, pressed it gently.

They were for the time being too tired to speak. What was there to say when another hour might see the end of them both ? Leaving nothing of Cole Courtney and Nora Falconer when the moon shone the next night save two heaps of earth marking their graves, while *El Matador* marched off to fresh triumphs. Nora had resolved to die with Cole, fighting by his side. Never would she accept life, as much as she loved it, on the terms that *El Matador* would offer. Their shoulders touched and the thrill of contact stirred the pair to life.

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"Gosh," muttered Cole, "you'd think this was a funeral instead of a little ruckus. The U.S. cavalry will come galloping over the hill at the last minute. It never fails."

A man was coming over the roof towards them, the trim military figure of the white-moustached Colonel Corrado, from whom no weariness could take the starch of many years of army service. He was seeking Cole.

"I have good and bad news for you, my children," he told the pair. "A messenger has just come in from the town of Olivares where Major Reyes is in command of a large Federal garrison. Mexico City has ordered his troops to come to our rescue. He should be here by midnight."

"And if we only hold out until then——" said Nora.

"But wait," went on the Colonel, "it is not as simple as that. In Mexico everyone is a revolutionist, impatient to see things turned over, hoping to get a big slice of the pie, as you Americans say. Major Reyes is like Ontra and many other officers, what you would call an opportunist. If he sees a chance to advance himself and that Matador and Ontra are sure to win, he will join them. I know Reyes : his loyalty is not to be counted on. Ontra claimed that all the near-by garrisons have turned rebel ; that may well be true."

"You think then he is sure to help *El Matador* ?" asked Nora.

Corrado shrugged his shoulders. "*Quién sabe ?* If we are still holding out and they offer him enough, he will probably add this force to theirs. Then it is sure to be the end."

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Cole nodded. The Colonel was right. This whole section of Mexico was honeycombed with conspiracy and plotting. Loyal officers like Corrado were rare: the rest were ambitious, self-seeking leaders who cared nothing for Mexico or her people.

"But if we should be winning," said Cole, "Reyes would be good and help us?"

Corrado nodded, smiling. "Of a certainty," he agreed. "If we should be winning. But that of course is an impossibility. The best we can do is to hold out until Reyes comes."

The dusty boots of the Colonel carried him away, leaving the pair alone in a little niche among the chimneys. The rebel guns were starting up again.

"Nevertheless, the moon is red," Cole said dreamily. "And that is a good sign. It should bring us good luck —our red moon."

"Our red moon," repeated Nora dreamily. "It won't go back on us, Cole."

He stood up and lifted her to her feet, to take her in his arms. There was a fresh outburst of guns below the wall, savage shouts.

"Nora, I love you more than I could ever tell you with words," said Cole simply. "I'll hope to have a lifetime to show just how much I care for you, if you'll have me. I know I don't deserve you, Nora. I've lived down here in a hard country; I've done a lot of things I'm ashamed of."

"While I," cooed Nora ironically, "have never had a wicked thought, never felt like swearing when I got mad, never wanted to tear off a corral rail and beat

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somebody with it. I've been a little angel, Cole, and you won't be surprised to see a cloud lowered for me most any time to take me away from a tough character like you. Dang it, Cole, I won't have you sticking me up a pedestal. I've been a bad 'un, too, in my life. I'd have you know I was called at one time that 'little she-hellion of Brand Falconer's'."

"In fact," she went on, "I'd like to compare pasts with you sometime; you and your blushing over a dancer that flirted with you and that calls you '*Azúcar*'. But don't let me catch you forgetting to blush when speaking about her," she said sternly. "And if I ever see you with little Conchita draped about your neck again, I won't save you the next time they want to hang you for a hoss-thief."

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CHAPTER XXII

DEATH STAMPEDE

El matador and Major Ontra were done with playing. When they started this time it was to be to the finish. And when the attack began, it started with a savage enthusiasm, one only natural to pure-hearted patriots filled with the noble principles of the revolution—*Tierra y Libertad.* Not to mention filling quantities of sotol.

Before the new attack the leaders had lectured their men, dwelling not only on their patriotic duty to free Mexico from the yoke, but also reminding them of the pretty señoritas within the hacienda and the prize horses which had been brought down from above the Border.

Their only strategy was to direct the main thrust of the attack at the east gate of the building defended by Colonel Corrado and the remnant of Federal soldiers and *vaqueros* under him. This was in recognition of the fact that the predominance of American cow-boys on the roofs of the headquarters building on the west made it by far the hardest nut to crack. And this time undoubtedly the attack through the haze under the red moon was in deadly earnestness, to which the semi-darkness and sotol lent courage. When comrades fell

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kicking, the others only laughed. It would make their share in the spoils that much the greater.

When Corrado was hard-pressed to keep back the repeated forays against him, Cole Courtney and as many others as could be spared went to the Colonel's assistance. Orders had been given that if Corrado lost the east building they were all to retreat to the headquarters building to make a final desperate stand. For losing that miscellany of peon quarters, wagon yards, and corrals meant that the end was close.

When Major Reyes arrived with his Olivares troops, he would find *El Matador's* men well mounted and pressing forward to certain victory. If only for personal safety, Reyes was bound to help in the final assault on the headquarters roofs. Which spelled inevitable disaster for the Americans and their Mexican allies, beset by numbers ten times their own. It spelled roofs slippery with blood and dotted with dead and wounded, and finally at the end, a futile stand by the remaining handful that would end only when the last man had been killed.

Facing that prospect, fresh energy animated the exhausted defenders. Three successive attacks they flung back, leaving still figures lying on the ground enclosed by the outer wall. Each attack had been directed mainly with the east gate as its object. This, leading into a narrow, long wagon yard, would give access to the roofs of the workers' shops and peon living-rooms, and to the corrals in which the horses were kept. The gate had been barricaded with bags of sand until it was almost as strong as the walls themselves, while

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at one side stood one of the high octagonal defence towers.

Yet in spite of its strength, it was at this gate that *El Matador* and Major Ontra had evidently determined they would make a breach in the thick walls of the building. For one thing the shadows were darker here, due to the angle at which the moon was shining. They could have waited for the moon to go down, to bring almost complete darkness, but angered by the long resistance and having word also of the soldiers coming under Reyes, the rebels realized the urgent need for haste.

The space between the six-foot outer wall behind which the rebels concentrated and the gate and its tower, was sprinkled with the bodies of dead and wounded men. There was no attempt to get these out of the way ; in a few minutes their *compañeros* would be callously trampling over them in a fresh attack.

Within their confining walls, the horses in the crowded corrals milled in fresh panic as the blasting thunder of the rifles again struck terror among them. Occasional shots had struck among the animals, sending down a few squealing horses to add to the panic of the rest. Helpless pawns in the battles between their masters and would-be masters, they tried again and again to smash down the stout wooden barriers between the various corrals, surging against the barriers in mad stampedes.

The third attack brought fresh strategy. This time the rebels when they attempted a rush were carrying logs and sheets of iron, the latter obtained from a

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neighbouring ranch. These logs and the sheets of iron stuck between them placed a few yards from the east gate served as a temporary barricade behind which the besiegers furiously began digging, throwing up dirt to make an earth-works.

Fully thirty men took crouching shelter behind this and stayed while Courtney and Corrado joined rifles to drive them out. Finally from the tower by the gate, rifles were able to angle down shots which sent the men in a scurrying retreat to the safety of the outer wall.

After this repulse, the firing died down as if the rebels had become temporarily discouraged and were taking time to plan out a more ingenious way of piercing the defence.

Cole Courtney took advantage of the interlude to return to the headquarters building. A bullet had slashed along the flesh of his forearm and Nora, seeing the blood-soaked sleeve, insisted on taking him to the "Red Cross" unit of the Countess Berdoo. She doused carbolic acid recklessly on it. Sandy, who had had the misfortune to receive a long gash across his ribs and was similarly treated, let out an anguished yowl.

"Suffering polecats!" he exclaimed. "Call this a hospital? I'd say it was a torture chamber. Oncet I had a leg sawed off and it didn't hurt half as much."

Nora went back to the east building with Cole, passing with him along a narrow passageway between two corrals where the highly-strung horses were running about like mad, flinging themselves occasionally with a crashing impact against the gates. One such corral emptied into the long wagon yard, closed at its far end

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by the gate against which *El Matador* had been directing his assaults.

The rebel guns had stopped almost altogether, but the lull held in it an ominous mystery. Colonel Corrado was pacing impatiently along a roof-top, warning his men near the gate and in the octagonal towers to keep a sharp look-out.

"Can't figure it out," said Cole worriedly to Nora. "They're up to something. Wish we had a spy or two in that outfit to slip us a word now and then. We'd——"

The rest of his words were drowned by the tremendous BOOM of an explosion that seemed to shake the thousands of tons of earth in the thick-walled building down to the foundations. The wagon yard rocked beneath Cole and Nora, and a moment later they were showered by fragments of broken earth. Dimly through the haze they could see the top of the tower by the east gate bulging out. From the men in it came half-strangled cries, and then the whole tower splitting apart sank earthward. Tower, wall, and gate all sank to a huge shapeless mound.

"Dynamite!" growled Cole. "They were planting a mine behind that barricade. Blasting their way in, the devils. Go back, Nora; we're in for it now."

He rushed forward as the exultant yells of *El Matador's* men split the night. At last the way to certain victory was open. Once the rebels had made a breach in the thick walls, they could overwhelm the defenders by sheer weight of numbers. A closely compact column of men charged forward into the thick

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screen of dust, their guns sending pale flashes through the murk as they ran, heading straight into the long wagon yard. From this yard access to the various roofs would be given them ; once they got to the roofs, there would remain only the mopping up of the defenders in the east building.

Desperately those left of Corrado's men and the Americans who had come to their aid emptied their guns, trying to check the advance. And check it they did, for a few moments, partly through the savage rain of bullets they sent, partly through the slow progress the attackers made in stumbling over the high, rough heap of earth. Then a wave of yelling men came over the mound and poured into the wagon yard. There the first men to arrive tried to climb the roofs, but for a little while the defence rifles kept them in the yard.

Cole had disappeared into the welter of guns and yelling men. Nora, instead of obeying his command to return to the headquarters building, remained at the far end of the wagon yard, while a few wild shots sailed over her head. They were done for, would all have to retreat, leaving the horses to the victors. The long drive from the Rio had ended in utter disaster.

Behind Nora there came the impact of a frightened bunch of horses in the corral, wildly lunging against the big gate which opened into the same yard into which the enemy was triumphantly pouring in ever-increasing numbers. In that pen it occurred to Nora there were over three hundred head of fear-maddened animals, crazy enough to stampede over whatever lay in their path—once they were free. And if that gate were open,

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the wagon yard would be their path, and the yelling rebel mob . . .

To Nora came a sudden flash of hope. The horses. More than three hundred half-tons of terrorized horseflesh, waiting to piston on stout legs at racing speed into the wagon yard! A desperate hope, but empires had been won at longer odds.

Through the dust-filled air she hurried to the corral gate. Made of heavy planks with several supporting cross-timbers along its length, it had withstood the batterings dealt it by the crazed horses all during the day. In a furious haste her fingers groped until they came in contact with the iron pin which held the curved bolt fastenings. The horses were gathering for a fresh surge in her direction; she could hear rather than see the ripple of their lunging advance.

Nora shuddered as she fumbled with the pin, which had caught in its slots. When the horses struck that gate and burst it open, they would come out as Sandy would put it, "like a lady bat outa hell". If Nora were in their path, she would be battered to a bloody pulp under the sledges of their hoofs. No matter. Resolutely she jerked at the pin. She had brought these horses down on her own responsibility. There was only one way in which they and the brave fighters in the beleaguered ranch might be saved—by making use of those horses now, even though it cost her life.

Cole's voice came out of the dust-screen, from the roof above her. "Nora!" he called. "Why haven't you gone back? We're leaving; got to drop back in another half-minute. I'll lift you up. Quick."

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She realized as she struggled with the iron pin that he had flung himself flat on the roof and was stretching his arms down towards her, not guessing what she was attempting.

"Coming, Cole," she answered clearly.

Through the planks she saw the heads and shoulders of the horses that were tearing towards her, and then, just before the wave of terror-stricken animals struck the gate, she was able to jerk out the pin, and holding her arms high over her head, jump for Cole's hands.

With a tremendous crash the first horses barged into the released gate, sending it flying back on its pivoting post. Nora, her wrists seized by Cole, was being drawn swiftly upward, but not quite in time. One of the first horses to burst through the open gateway was shoved to one side, striking her with tremendous force, and all but jerking her from Cole's straining arms.

Dimly, as darkness shuttered down for her, Nora knew she was being lifted. And as she sank towards complete unconsciousness, she heard the mad drum of hoofs, and then down the long wagon yard, the sudden screams of men. . . .

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CHAPTER XXIII

NIGHT FLIGHT

It was fortunate for Nora Falconer's future peace of mind that the girl was unconscious during the stampede. The wagon yard and the shrieks that sounded from it were not nice things to see and hear.

A handful of the rebels had secured a foothold on a roof, but the main body of the yelling horde that had poured into the yard was directly in the path of the horses. In the excitement of trading shots with the ranchers, these had no inkling of the stampede of the panic-stricken horse herd until it was nearly on them. Hearing the thud of the animals' hoofs, seeing through the dusty air the heads and shoulders, the rebels had only time to shout *"Los Diablos!"* before the first wave of that sweeping tide of horseflesh was on them.

As an engulfing flood of black water comes down an arroyo, the leaders of the river of horses struck the first men, bowling them over, sending them hurtling through the air, leaving them for the rest of the herd to trample. Other rebels back down the wagon yard had a little time to act. Some dropped their guns and fled, some shot wildly into the charging mass, while others ducked quickly into the nearest openings that promised shelter.

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Through those unfortunates who remained in their path, the heavy ram of the great juggernaut of the terrorized horses rolled. Nothing short of a wall would have stopped the flight of the animals, frenzied by the all-day battle, at last smelling freedom. Before the rush, men were catapaulted high into the air, scattered as if by a whirlwind, knocked from their feet, to fall beneath the flails of a thousand flinty hoofs. The red Mexico moon looked down on a horrible sight, one perhaps as awful as it had ever beheld in the ancient days when Aztec priests had performed their bloody sacrificial rites.

There were many, of course, who escaped: those bringing up the rear of the attack who were able to scatter to the open country; there were many who slipped into sheds, and a few who managed to scramble up on the nearest roof. One of these latter was *El Matador* who had been swirled in the panicky rush for safety against a side-wall. Above him, he saw the projecting end of a log beam and, leaping to clutch it, he swung himself agilely to a place of safety. Major Ontra, who had been close to *El Matador*, jumped up also for the beam but, less athletic than the bullfighter, his fingers reached a leg of *El Matador* instead.

"*Socorre, mi compadre!*" Ontra pleaded frantically, but *El Matador* was having all he could do to help himself. Callously he kicked loose his fellow-patriot and a horse sent the officer hurtling high in the air.

Safely on the roof, *El Matador* did not even look back to see the fate of his followers. He knew the revolution was done for, and he also was done for unless

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he made his escape. The rebel cause was ended by the bloody disaster taking place in the wagon yard; although in numbers they would still be strong enough to resume the attack, they would have no stomach for further fighting.

The guns had stopped, and behind *El Matador* as he crawled over the roofs, there came only the hair-lifting cries of injured men. The horses were scattering over the valley. It was fitting that the horses should have ended the mad enterprise of *El Matador*. He it was who had persuaded his half-brother and his father, the Kilgour pair, to bring the herd into Mexico for sale at high prices to the revolutionists. And now those same horses had destroyed at one blow the revolution, but *El Matador* was in no mood to appreciate the irony of that; he was too full of fears for his own safety.

Already, as he hid among the chimneys, his followers who had not been caught in the wagon yard trap were running towards the creek to get their horses and vehicles to start a wild flight back to San Telmo. *El Matador* had no desire to associate himself with this riffraff; for one thing, it was altogether probable that the mob might take summary vengeance on their erstwhile hero. Like a house-cat, *El Matador* stole across the roofs, taking advantage of the confusion which overwhelmed the hacienda. The battle ended, the ranchers and their employees were hastening to the aid of their stricken enemies, building a huge bonfire in the wagon yard to light their gruesome work of removing the battered broken bodies.

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Crossing the space between the buildings of the ranch, he managed to climb unobserved to the roof of the headquarters structure. From this he intended to make his way to the back wall and strike across country. The roof which had been the scene of almost continuous fighting since morning was now deserted. Making his way cautiously on all fours, *El Matador* stopped once to look down into a court, the one which the Countess Berdoo was adding as an extension to her "hospital". Men were being brought in on improvised stretchers, but *El Matador* had no eyes for his unfortunate fellows. Directly below him he saw something which drew his mouth into an ugly snarl. Cole Courtney bending over Nora Falconer.

Cole had carried the girl hastily to a cot in the court rather than into a room ; the outside air would help revive her. Already she had come awake, and was smiling up wanly at Cole, as he put a supporting arm about her while he held a cup of water to her lips. The Countess Berdoo had made a hasty examination and had proclaimed no bones broken.

El Matador was able to catch snatches of their talk. Cole was scolding her gently for risking her life by opening the gate of the horse corral, while Nora only smiled within the circle of his arm. So, thought *El Matador,* as his teeth shut with a sudden click, this coppery-haired American señorita had brought disaster single-handed to the rebels. The quick-thinking brain in that pretty head had wrecked the revolution in the moment of its success. Muttering maledictions, *El Matador's* hand went down to withdraw the gold-fili-

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greed pistol from its holster. Two shots and he would have revenge on this pair who through their efforts had smashed the San Telmo rebellion.

More wounded were crowding the court and Cole picked up Nora, cot and all, to remove her to a secluded corner in the shrubbery.

El Matador, watching Courtney as he put down the cot with its occupant, saw him bend over Nora for a swift kiss, and then hurry away, calling to an Indian girl to watch the patient. Courtney was needed elsewhere, and in a few minutes Nora would be fully recovered.

As Courtney left, *El Matador* slipped the pistol back into its holster. Looking at the girl, his eyes creased to slits. Killing her would bring nothing but a sense of satisfaction, and *El Matador* was a materialist who craved something more substantial. He had planned after his victory to take this American girl for his own, to drag her with him while he rode on his campaigns, casting her aside when he tired of her, as he had cast aside the dancer, Conchita. If he could yet take that coppery-haired daughter of Brand Falconer, the prize would in part pay him for his disappointments. The fact that she had only scorn for him made him desire her the more.

Why not still take her? During his boyhood he had ridden the country north of *Hacienda Encantada*; knew the mountain hide-outs. They could never trail him in the confusion of the rebel flight. If he had a pair of horses, he could snatch her up and gallop off unnoticed. Getting the horses was the riskier part of

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the venture ; his gaudy uniform would give him away at once if he left the roofs to try to get mounts.

He was about to give up the project when he suddenly saw, a few feet from him, a woman sitting with her slim legs dangling over the edge of the roof, looking down on the court, illumined by flaring torches, and filled with wounded men and their nurses. No mistaking the lithe figure of Conchita, the tempestuous little dancer, who had once for love been willing to follow *El Matador* into a hail of bullets.

El Matador moved nearer the girl to crouch finally behind a chimney and let a "Psst !", following it with a softly called "Conchita".

The girl gave a start and then, getting to her feet, crossed towards him. *El Matador* stepped out, since he was far enough back on the roof to be out of sight of the people below.

Identifying him, Conchita opened her mouth to scream, and then, changing her mind, put her hands on her hips and regarded him contemptuously. "*El Matador*, who would be *El Conquistador*," she scoffed. "Who told me he had more important affairs than little Conchita. Where are your more important affairs now ? All that is important to you is what adobe wall they will stand you against, like a blindfolded horse in the bullring."

El Matador drew himself to his full height. "Never will they execute me," he declared. "If not that I came here to get something, I would now be miles away."

"Something you came to get ?" Conchita asked curiously. "What ?"

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"You," answered *El Matador* boldly. "It is for you, Conchita, that I have come. My head, it was so full of the revolution that it had no room for you, but my heart—it has never forgotten. I am going back to Spain to appear in the rings there. I am done fighting for these peons and *pelados*. You will go to Spain with me, *carissima* ?"

Conchita stared at him. Of all the men with whom she had been in love, *El Matador* had held the highest place. She hated him now, of course. Yet he had come for her, had risked his life among his enemies merely to ask her to go with him. Conchita's hates and loves were never very far apart ; it was easy for one to change to the other.

When *El Matador's* arms slipped about her, she gave a little sob and embraced him in return. As she had declared to Cole Courtney, Conchita needed affection, and even in defeat *El Matador* appeared as a hero, *un gran hombre.*

"Two horses, quick !" he was telling her. "Bring them to the north wall. We will ride north into the Tres Pinos country and hide. Two saddled horses, and be sure they are good ones. *Prontito !*" he urged with a little shove.

In the confusion, it was not difficult for Conchita to obey *El Matador's* command. Men were hurrying about, taking care of the pitiful bodies of rebels who had been found alive in the path of the stampede. Cole Courtney, Colonel Corrado, and the recently arrived Major Reyes were conferring. Reyes, eager to show his loyalty, wanted to ride after the fugitives to shoot down

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as many as possible. Colonel Corrado sternly refused that: the rebels had been punished enough. Two of the ringleaders had been found among the dead—Major Ontra and Rodriquez. The big American, Harge Kilgour, who had brought down horses and guns for the rebels, had also been found, a mangled mass of blood and pulp. *El Matador* alone had escaped, and he would be picked up later.

No one paid any attention to Conchita when she hurried into the corrals except Sandy Neil who, hilarious from the victory and sotol, stopped her to demand a kiss. Conchita gave it gaily and passed on. Calmly selecting two saddled horses, she swung up on one and rode off leading the other.

El Matador who had descended into the shadows of the north wall of the building awaited her impatiently. All the various entrances to the courtyards had been opened, and near the one cut through the north wall, Nora Falconer was just sitting up on her cot. From where he stood, *El Matador* could see her. She seemed still a little dazed, which would make her easier to handle. The shrubs on the corner of the poorly lighted court screened her from observation of those hurrying in and out, and with the cries of the suffering men a choked-off scream from the girl would go unnoticed.

"Quick," urged Conchita, "we must ride."

Matador raised the flap of his pistol holster, stepped close to her horse. "When I am done with a woman I am done with her—for good," he snarled, and then laughed to see the sudden surprise in Conchita's dark

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eyes. "The horses are not for us, *mujer*; they are for me and the American girl."

El Matador flashed the pistol upward to use as a club. Just before it came down, Conchita flung up her elbow and deflected the blow to her shoulder. The force was so great nevertheless that she was knocked from the saddle, falling to the ground, to lie there moaning. *El Matador* stooped to snatch the scarf from around her neck and tied a big knot in its middle. Then he sprang through the gateway into the court.

Luck was with him; Cole Courtney had not returned, and Nora had sent the Indian girl attendant away. She turned as his boots crunched behind her, seeing what she took at first to be an apparition. The cry that came to her lips was muffled as a dark hand closed on her throat, choking off her screams and pinioning her against the wall. Still a little sick, dizzy, she fought furiously, but swiftly he thrust the knot of Conchita's scarf in her mouth and tied it behind her head with the aid of his teeth. Then, with the girl struggling in his arms, *El Matador* slipped through the north wall entrance and swung the girl into the saddle of one of the horses. There with a few deft movements he tied the girl's wrists to the horn and sprang up on the other saddle.

Nora's lips tried to form the word "Cole!" but the knotted scarf let out only a feeble croak. So swift had been the assault that she could not yet fully comprehend its meaning. It would probably be several minutes before her absence was discovered, and then there would be no indication of where she had gone.

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Her horse was now in motion, following after *El Matador's* at a lope. There was no glimmer of hope to comfort her. This beast, half American, half Mexican, could do with her as he willed.

"Just like I told you," called back *El Matador* exultantly, "you will ride with my army. My one-man army. You will cook for me, be my companion, my *soldadera*."

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CHAPTER XXIV

LUCK OF A RED MOON

THE blow that had struck Conchita's shoulder and had knocked her from the saddle had not left the girl unconscious. As the two horses pounded off into the night, she managed to sit up. Moaning, she was able finally to get to her feet and to stagger back towards the courtyard.

Cole had stopped at the cot where he had left Nora, but, seeing her gone, was not alarmed, taking it for granted that she had left to help the Countess Berdoo. He was about to turn away in search of her, when Conchita appeared, weeping with mingled anger and pain, weaving uncertainly. Courtney reached her in time to keep her from falling.

"*Azúcar*," gasped Conchita. "Tony—*El Matador*, he has taken her. Your *querida*. He rode off with her."

"What!" exclaimed Courtney unbelievingly.

"It is true," insisted Conchita. "He said he was going to Tres Pinos to hide out. He tied her to the saddle. They rode away but now."

Courtney looked down at Conchita and, seeing the blood coming through the cloth above her shoulder, suddenly believed. Leaving her on the cot where

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Nora had lain, he raced through the patio, across an open space, and into a corral where a few saddled horses stood. His eyes lit on Sandy Neil's big grey, which Courtney had ridden before. Knowing the speed and stamina of the animal, he vaulted into the saddle and dug in the rowels savagely. Tres Pinos lay to the north, in a mountain range ; there was a well-known trail between it and the *Hacienda Encantada*. This undoubtedly *El Matador* had taken.

One thought alone was in Courtney's mind as he rode : Nora had been stolen. Taken from the midst of a dozen men who would cheerfully have laid down their lives for her.

Gradually his brain got over the shock. The trail to Tres Pinos angled north around some little foothills, but the cow-boys on the ranch generally used a short cut through those hills. This shorter trail joined the main road again at a line camp some five miles from the hacienda. Instinctively he turned into the shorter trail.

Over them as the grey horse stretched out the red moon hung low in the sky, the same moon which he and Nora had declared would bring them luck, their moon. Luck, he thought bitterly. Luck ! He could not swear as he pushed the grey into a killing pace ; his fear was too deep for that relief.

He had lived a hard life here in Mexico, had been forced to, but below the hard shell was a man capable of deep feeling. Nora had stirred the best in him ; losing her was the same as losing everything in the world that was good. Not the girl's beauty alone had

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drawn him; Nora Falconer was more than pretty; her attraction was a thing also of soul—gentleness and sweetness in her, and the strength to sacrifice her own life to save the hacienda and its defenders.

He realized as he tore up the steep grades that he had not told others to follow; the news had been too overwhelming. Conchita would tell them, however, and Sandy Neil and Lin Button and the rest would soon be riding after them. Not that they would be needed; he could handle a dozen like Antonio Trias, alias *El Matador*, when Nora Falconer was at stake.

Until he shook the reins to quirt the tiring grey he had forgotten the bullet-slashed arm. No matter; he needed only one arm and one hand, either to shoot that evil-hearted toreador breed or to take him by the neck and choke the life from him.

Through the hills he plunged, with the big grey giving everything in him, setting a pace that would have led Cole to fire any of his riders, had he caught them so abusing a mount. He did not realize how fast they were travelling; he knew only that the time seemed interminable before he topped out on the hill above the line camp by which the main trail ran. Towards the small ark building and a large earth-walled tank of water beyond it he plummeted down a brush steep, landing with a rattling of stones sliding after him.

When he drew up behind the small house the grey stood with his head lowered, his sides heaving, completely exhausted. He would never be the same again, and yet Cole, who was considerate of horses, hardly

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noticed his condition. That ride had been a crawling progress to him.

From the other side of the house he looked down the trail towards the hacienda. There was no sign of any riders, only the empty stretch of valley. This had been a wild-goose chase, he despaired, and yet this trail was the one *El Matador* would undoubtedly take if he had ridden north as Conchita had declared. He must have ridden past already, but there were no fresh tracks.

Agonized minutes he waited, straining eyes and ears, until there came out of the silent night a faint muffled beat of hoofs. He waited until he made sure there were two riders before he withdrew to the shadow of the house.

Cole was grinning a little, a wolfish grin, which persisted even in an intolerable pain that began flaming along his arm. That red moon overhead had not played them false, after all. It was still their moon, his and Nora's. *El Matador* in trying his little stunts in the light of that moon was going against powerful medicine.

As *El Matador* came on unsuspectingly, leading behind him the loping horse which bore Nora, Courtney could easily have shot and dumped him from the saddle. Instead he waited until the rider was passing the house before stepping out. At first sight of the figure, *El Matador* jerked his horse back, his hand going down to the pistol, but Cole had him covered. And then *El Matador* seemed also to realize the inevitable, that he was beaten. Some cursed magic must have trans-

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ported this big American here ahead of him. It was useless to try to use his gun. He put up his hands immediately and at a curt order from Courtney climbed down. Cole disarmed him, taking a pistol and a knife, and then walked back to Nora to cut the rawhide thongs which bound her hands to the saddle. She came down with a little sigh into his arms. It suddenly seemed not at all surprising that he should be here. It had been so destined from the first, with their red moon in the sky.

She stayed in his arms a long moment, glad of their strength. They would always be ready, ready to protect her or to hold her.

"Are you able to start back to the ranch, honey?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes, but aren't you going, too?"

"I'll be delayed a little," Cole said grimly. "I want you to go on ahead, leading *El Matador's* horse."

Cole's voice was calm, deliberate, as it always was even under the greatest stress. The deliberation in his voice and movements was more menacing to *El Matador* than if Cole had stormed and cursed.

"You have won this time," said *El Matador*, affecting carelessness. "You will take me back to the ranch, eh?"

"There are some men back there who would be glad to see you," returned Cole. "Not only the Federals, but the riders who came down here with Miss Falconer. I ought to take you back to turn you over to the Yaqui *vaqueros* to play with."

El Matador shuddered at that. He well knew what

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those Indians, with generations of experience in torturing, could do to a man.

"But I'm not taking you back," went on Cole. "Not alive, anyway. You've done enough harm to deserve quite a number of deaths. I'm killing you."

"Just shooting me down in cold blood?" sneered *El Matador.*

"I believe in giving even a rat a chance for his life," said Courtney. "It wouldn't be any pleasure to just beef you like I'd kill a steer. Miss Falconer is starting back with these two horses. If by a long chance you should win, you'll have the grey I rode. You couldn't get him off a jog-trot."

El Matador plucked up hope. "Of course, as the challenged," he said quickly, "I have the right to name the weapons."

Cole grinned a little, as if good-humouredly granting a child a wish. "I didn't know this could be called a duel," he returned, "but it won't make any difference in the end what sort of weapons we use. Go ahead; name 'em."

El Matador drew a deep breath of relief. "I choose —that," he said quickly, pointing to his knife, which Courtney had dropped to the ground.

"No, no," interposed Nora. "He is a toreador, Cole. That has been his business—killing with a sword which is much like a knife. He has practised for many years."

Cole turned to her, put his hands on her shoulders, lifting his stiff arm with difficulty. "Don't you worry," he said, "I have had to use a knife myself occasionally

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down here. Always carry one. There's been a little prejudice against knives up above the Border lately, but a lot of my Texas people in the old days used to be pretty handy with Bowies. You ride on for the ranch, Nora. Likely you'll meet some of the boys down the trail. I'll give you both guns so he won't follow you. It won't take but a few minutes. I'll be catching up with you inside half a mile."

"So you think," sneered *El Matador.*

"So I know," stated Courtney with supreme confidence. "Señor Matty, your string is plumb played out. You're a blowed-up Mexican *mozo.*"

Nora went reluctantly, with fear like a knife in her. There was no moving Cole. She knew the pride of these men below and along the Border. They were ready to fight at the drop of a hat, against any odds, refusing no challenge, possessing a fierce pride in their courage. That was ingrained in Cole Courtney, and there was no setting it aside. He had said he was going to kill a man, and he was going to do it. It was a world in which women could not enter, one involving a code that might be foolish and yet existed. The primeval fighting code of man against man. . . .

The red moon looked down on two men who faced each other in front of the adobe-walled camp. Both of them wore a cloth guard bound round their left forearms, *El Matador* the gaudily decorated and gold-braided coat of his uniform. A moment they crouched, Courtney with his set, grim smile, *El Matador* watchful, alert. There was something about this Courtney that got under the breed's skin, a strength which he had felt

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back at the hacienda where Cole had calmly faced *El Matador* and a dozen of his men. It shook *El Matador's* nerve.

"Don't forget, Señor Matty," remarked Cole jeeringly, "that you ain't in a bullring."

El Matador snarled and then moved swiftly in and out, his blade darting with him. It was but a feint to try out the bigger man, to startle him into leaving an opening. *El Matador* moved with a catlike grace, the sureness and swiftness of a man whose life had depended on his speed in many a bullring. He came in again, pivoted, slowly moving round the American who turned with him, waiting, refusing to be led into any false motions.

There was nothing pretty about this : two men who had been trained to fight, trying to kill each other in the quickest way possible. *El Matador* was thinking that this swift-moving American with perfect co-ordination of muscle and brain, and nerves, would have been a good fighter in the bullring.

"Remember, Señor Matty," said Cole, "I am no bull, to charge here and there. What's holdin' yuh, feller ? Maybe-so you should have your red *muleta* to wave in front of me."

El Matador snarled and then like a beam of light he leaped in, his knife a dull line of silver. As swiftly Courtney's cloth-protected arm rose to meet the attack, passing behind *El Matador's* knife, the blade hanging a little in the folds of the cloth.

El Matador sprang back, too late—exquisite agony flashed through one of his knee-caps. The gringo had

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kicked it, striking swiftly with his booted foot a terrific blow that sent *El Matador* stumbling back crippled, striving desperately to keep his feet.

Courtney was on him, dropping his own knife, his right hand now clutching the wrist of the other's knife hand. Slowly he turned the point of the knife towards *El Matador's* chest. *El Matador* grunted; the fool had had him, but intended to kill his enemy with his own knife.

"Work fast, Matty," said Courtney. "Work fast."

El Matador wrestled vainly to free that bent wrist, while the pain from his knee made him writhe. Failing to break loose, his left hand streaked back towards the knot of hair which he wore on his neck, as sign of his profession. From a scabbard down his back he brought out another knife, long, narrow, double-edged. The gringo had showed him a trick: he would go him one better.

Courtney stepped back, dodging the blade, and then he suddenly went to the ground, dragging *El Matador* down with him.

El Matador's free hand moved convulsively; with that second knife at close quarters he would disembowel his antagonist, slash him to shreds. He had forgotten one important thing—the knife which Courtney had twisted towards him. *El Matador*, going down, fell full on the blade.

One strangled gasp came from him and then he grunted and rolled on his side, his blood staining the earth as the blood of his four-footed victims had often gushed out in the arenas.

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For *El Matador* the moon was dancing a jig in a purple sky. A crazy red moon which had broken loose in the heavens, and was bobbing about like a child's rubber ball bounced at the end of a string.

To *El Matador's* dimming senses there seemed to come from the distance the thin call of a trumpet. The signal that would summon him to bring in his sword, the *estoque*, and his red cape, the *muleta*, first to show his skill with the bull, to pass him this way and that, making him charge so close that the animal's shoulder would touch *El Matador's* while the crowd applauded wildly. Then finally as the weary bull waited, *El Matador* would dart in between the horns and out, delivering one stroke with the *estoque* between the shoulder-blades, and another bull would go lunging down to death. A great gusty sigh came from the man. The trumpet had called for the last time for *El Matador*. . . .

Nora Falconer galloped back, disobeying orders as usual. And why not ? It was her happiness that was at stake here, as well as Cole's foolish sense of honour. She flung herself into Courtney's arms, and stayed there thankfully for a long time.

Leading the weary grey they rode back towards the hacienda, down into a swale where the tall grass dragged at their stirrups. "And you thought there wasn't enough range for all of us down here, you silly," joked Courtney. "You had to suspect that we wanted to keep your horses from coming down so our stock wouldn't starve."

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"You're hard enough to be suspected of anything," retorted Nora. "Cole, I want a messenger to ride to send a wire to Dad that we have arrived safe."

"And have met the enemy and they are yours. You can also wire your father that he needn't rush down to look after his daughter. She's being looked after by a well-known horse-thief called Cole Courtney. In a month or so, Nora, you and I will go up together to bring him down. And some day you will sell this outfit for a million dollars and we'll all go back to a country where knives are used only for eating pie. Meanwhile I'm hoping, Nora, that you never take it in your head to start a revolution down here. You'd get a lot farther than *El Matador*, Ontra and Company, specially with the help of a red moon."

"Red moon," she repeated dreamily. "To think, Cole, that we'll be seeing it together many times. And every time we see it, we'll have to celebrate."

"In that case I'll ride up the sky and rope it for you and snake it down to hang on our gatepost."

"And you'd probably do it, too," she said. Cole could do anything he set his mind to do. He was that sort.

He reached over now to lift her to the saddle in front of him and murmured, "If you said the word, honey, I'd sure try."

A cavalcade of wild riders clattered up to them suddenly, Lin Button, Sandy Neil, the Countess Berdoo, and the rest of the Falconer crew sashaying out hell-bent to rescue a boss from a kidnapper. They pulled up to stare in astonishment.

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"I knew it," said the Countess Berdoo. "Knew there was no use of our riding out; Cole would take care of it."

"And I knowed it, too," bellowed Sandy Neil. "Golram it, ridin' off with that grey *caballo* of mine ag'in. This here dang hoss-stealin' has got to be stopped."

"I'll see that he stops it," promised Nora. "I'll break him of that—and a heap of other things."

In sight of them all she kissed him. And as a cloud drifted across the face of the moon, there appeared in the sky what looked suspiciously like an enormous wink. -

THE END

.....F/O
Adjutant, 138 R. S. U.